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LEE Chang-dong

KIM Young-jin

Korean Film Directors



LEE Chang-dong

LEE Chang-dong is a director who positioned himself uniquely in the Korean film scene. LEE is like an island isolated from any of his contemporary film directors... LEE's films have provided the audience with a chance to question and introspect the nature of film as medium. Conventional but avant-garde at the same time, the unique characteristics of his films seem to result from both obsessions with realism and a self-reflective structure.

In his films, LEE embraces the scars of history and reality as well as the illusory nature of the film medium. At the same time, he asks the viewers if a film can be a medium of mass communication to convey the meaningfulness of reality. This is something that his contemporary directors have never attempted. And this is why LEE is considered as a great artist in the Korean film scene even though he has a filmography of only three films with his fourth to be released soon... I hope that this book can function as an entryway into the unique cinematic world of LEE Chang-dong, a distinguishing figure in Korean film history.

- From the Preface

12,000 won / US\$ 16.00



9 788991 913141

ISBN 978-89-91913-14-1

Seoul Selection



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The Korean Film Directors series is one of Korean Film Council's projects to furnish an international audience with insight and analysis into the works of Korea's most representative film directors.

The series aims to expand upon the existing body of knowledge on Korean film, educate the general public of the history of Korean film and Korean film directors, and draw attention to the significance of works that represent Korean film. Critics who share their insight in the series are leaders in their respective specialties. Each volume includes critical commentary on films, an extensive interview with the director, and a comprehensive filmography for reference.

LEE Chang-dong

Written by KIM Young-jin

Translated by PARK Sang-hee

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Published by Seoul Selection

B1 Korean Publishers Association Bldg., 105-2 Sagan-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-190, Korea

Phone (82-2) 734-9567

Fax (82-2) 734-9562

<http://www.seoulselection.com>

email: publisher@seoulselection.com

ISBN: 978-89-91913-14-1 03680

Printed in the Republic of Korea

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Preface

LEE Chang-dong is a director who positioned himself uniquely in the Korean film scene. LEE is like an island isolated from any of his contemporary film directors. It was at the age of almost 40 when he came on to the film scene as a scriptwriter and assistant director. Riding on the coattails of his reputation as a novelist, LEE's debut film *Green Fish* successfully ushered him into Chungmuro.

Green Fish, borrowing stylistic elements from gangster flicks, is a film that intersects the story of a young man with the dark shadows of Korean society under industrialization. Critics praised the film's solid storytelling technique, but also pointed out the lack of visual appeal. This seemed to foreshadow the strengths and weaknesses of his next films, which originates from his background as a novelist.

LEE, however, began to build his own cinematic world which cannot be categorized by the critics. *Peppermint Candy* adopts a unique technique of reversing the time frame while portraying the life of a man drifting around in the oppressive and painful space of Korean history, beginning with the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. *Oasis* is a love story between an ex-convict and a disabled woman, entangling brief fantasies with traditional melodramatic conventions.

LEE's films have provided the audience with a chance to question and introspect

the nature of film as a medium. Conventional but avant-garde at the same time, the unique characteristics of his films seem to result from both obsessions with realism and a self-reflective structure. In his films, LEE embraces the scars of history and reality as well as the illusory nature of the film medium. At the same time, he asks the viewers if a film can be a medium of mass communication to convey the meaningfulness of reality. This is something that his contemporary directors have never attempted. And this is why LEE is considered as a great artist in the Korean film scene even though he has a filmography of only three films with his fourth to be released soon.

LEE Chang-dong is of the same generation as PARK Kwang-su, one of the “Korean New Wave” directors; but what sets LEE apart from them is his idealistic attitude toward history and reality. PARK’s focus on imagery and his tendency to favor intellectual narrators are not found in LEE’s films. Neither is found in LEE’s films the radical deconstruction of film structure that JANG Sun-woo, another Korean New Wave leader, experimented with. Nor does LEE deal with conventionally prohibited historical subjects like JUNG Ji-young does. Rather, with his essentialist attitude, LEE creates his films as a way to make the viewers reflect on the possibility that a film can be a medium to explore meaningful realistic subjects. As he moved from the realm of a novelist focusing on text to the realm of a filmmaker focusing on visual language, LEE became a serious director in the Korean film scene who quietly questions the essence of cinema. Even though his filmography is not many, he seems more adventurous than his younger fellow directors in the sense that his skeptical attitude about the function of film, ironically enough, keeps him trying continuously to find out what film can do. By asking skeptical questions, he regenerates himself.

I hope that this book can function as an entryway into the unique cinematic world of LEE Chang-dong, a distinguishing figure in Korean film history. The interview in this book is a compilation of four different interviews I had with director LEE. Also, with permission from my fellow critic KIM Seong-uk, I excerpted a part of his interview with LEE, which was published in *Film Language* (Summer 2003). My assertion on the relationship between reality and fantasy

appearing in LEE's films was mainly influenced by discussions with KIM. I would like to thank him for his generosity.

To write this book, I met LEE Chang-dong for the fifth time. He was in the post-production process on *Secret Sunshine*, which was soon to be released. I wasn't able to see the film nor was I able to talk much about it with him. That is because LEE, who completely immerses himself in the work until he finishes, has an obsessive aversion to any premature predictions about his unfinished films. Yet, I had a premonition that his new film would be a significant turning point in his career. For now, I hope my premonition will turn out right. The film will be released around the time this book is published. One thing is for sure—his new film will show how he has evolved for a four-year hiatus that resulted from him taking the position as the Minister of Culture and Tourism.

LEE Chang-dong is a director who does not rest on his laurels. Maybe so are most artists, but he is a particularly strict one. His ceaseless efforts for self-innovation are full of enormous energy and I don't think that energy will go down any time soon.

KIM Young-jin

Spring, 2007

Seoul



Introduction

The last time I met LEE Chang-dong was late March 2007, when he had just finished a rough cut of his new film *Secret Sunshine* and was about to begin the sound mixing process. Before meeting him, I called the production company and asked for a peek of the rough cut to get some idea for an interview, but they said it's impossible. So I had to interview LEE, feeling like a blind person trying to understand an elephant by touching it, about his new film and what he had been up to since he resigned as the Minister of Culture and Tourism.

I met LEE Chang-dong at a café located in the quiet area of Samcheong-dong, Seoul. A little while after we seated ourselves, the café owner came over and said discreetly, "I am afraid the electricity will go out for a while. My apologies for the inconvenience." Just as the photo shoot was almost done, the café fell into a pleasant darkness. It wasn't all too dark. It was like the whole inside of the café was fully shaded. There was also pleasant quietness, as music couldn't be played because of the electricity failure. Talking to LEE about his new film often seemed as desolate as the darkness in the café.

We exchanged our thoughts rather than information. The conversation started at 2 pm with a cup of tea and lasted until dusk when we finished dinner. It wasn't a conversation with serious questions and answers. Rather, it was a loose and relaxed chat with many jokes and frequent silence, gossiping about films, filmmakers and social phenomena. We spent the afternoon as if we were slackers.

Although *Secret Sunshine* is LEE's first film after a long hiatus, he is deliberately

indifferent to the fuss about it being his “comeback” film. “It’s been a while, so I think I lost some sense of making films. This film is just ‘normal.’ I’m not satisfied. Things could’ve been more ‘normal.’ Even after finishing the editing, I wished it had been simpler.” He emphasized several times that *Secret Sunshine* is a ‘normal’ film. Assuming that this should be the secret aesthetic keyword for the new film, I tried to lead the conversation to get more out of it, but he stopped me.

“Your choice of the word, ‘normal,’ arouses me,” I told him. “I’m getting anxious to see the movie, all of sudden.”

“No,” LEE said, “Like I said, the film is just ordinary and normal. There is nothing more to it. There aren’t any stylized cinematic devices. I just have plain looking shots. You will understand when you see it.”

There were rumors going around in Chungmuro that the shooting of *Secret Sunshine* was done under the extremely tense atmosphere. According to the rumors, the lead actors, SONG Kang-ho and JEON do-youn, almost passed out from exhaustion because of LEE’s well-known perfectionism. I once heard that SONG jokingly complained to someone on the phone that, because of the repeated shooting which went on forever, his body smelled like meat loaf. When I told LEE about these stories, he was nonchalant.

“It wasn’t that bad. We didn’t particularly do more shooting repeatedly for the same shot than other times. We decided on one thing, which is ‘No long takes for this movie.’ Instead, we tried to shoot the same shot from different angles, so we could use them in editing. But then again, that made things way too complicated. So sometimes we just went for long takes again.”

“Did you shoot them in sequence?”

“Most of the time I did, because the emotional flow is important.”

“Then, as the film goes on, the shots get longer than they were in the beginning?”

“No, not really. Or maybe a little bit. But that’s not something I intended. As I told you, this film is really ‘normal’.”

“I suppose there are many scenes in which the main male and female characters talk to each other. Did you use editing to put them together?”



Secret Sunshine, 2007

“Sure, like in TV dramas, alternately shooting faces. I did that.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever utilized such a conventional filming style before.”

“No, but I went for normality in this film. And I think the nature of film should be normal. I regret I couldn’t find a way to make things even simpler.”

Secret Sunshine is a story of a woman who travels with her child to her deceased husband’s hometown.

“The setup itself is not so realistic. A woman going to her dead husband’s hometown to spend the rest of her life is not really plausible. But at the beginning of the film, she loses her child in an accident. It’s not that the accident is the central focus, however. Then a car mechanic hangs around this unfortunate woman. He’s not exactly trying to have a relationship with her, but he just has a fondness for her. That fills out the rest of the story.”

“So does that mean the film is more about the reactions to an incident rather

than the incident itself?”

“No, not necessarily.”

“I’m curious about the cinematic mood because, although the incidents are significant, the film is not focused on those incidents, but rather follows the lives of the characters after the...”

“You’ve got to see it to understand it. The reason I’m not giving you a detailed storyline is because it could give you the wrong impression about the film and then the audience would have preconceived ideas. In fact, there isn’t a distinct storyline. Although the female protagonist experiences traumatic incidents, she overcomes these in her own way at the beginning of the film. And then the film is about the hereafter.”

LEE Chang-dong used to be a novelist and his films are famous for perfect plot lines. LEE tightly arranges the plot and then while shooting, he transforms the literary aspects of the plot. His second film, *Peppermint Candy* utilizes time reversal and his third film *Oasis* positions reality and melodramatic fantasy as if they are mirrored images and then later subverts them.

“There aren’t any cinematic devices this time. It just flows like water,” he said.

The more I listened to him, the more convinced I became that *Secret Sunshine* was hiding a huge ambition.

“No, it’s not like that. It’s a simple movie. People around me worry about it.”

“My take on the cinematic devices in your previous films is a bit different. When I read the scripts, the prose had significant metaphoric meaning, but when the film was made, it seemed the literary imagination was directly actualized in your films.”

“Give me an example.”

“There is a scene in *Oasis* where upon encountering a traffic jam, Jong-du and Gong-ju get off the bus on the Chunggae overpass and start to dance...”

“Right, there were those things, like an elephant appears out of the blue. With *Secret Sunshine*, I tried not to do anything like that.”

“Actually, I liked the elephant scene. It gives the feeling that we are plunging into the cinematic imagination. What is special in *Oasis* is that things mundane to ordinary people become the object of fantasy for Jong-du and Gong-ju. When they

imagine playing with a water bottle in the subway, it becomes a fantasy. But for ordinary people, it's not something special. I like the contradiction.”

“There isn't anything like that in *Secret Sunshine*. Not at all.”

Whatever his position is, LEE seems to have an ability to objectify himself. He demonstrated this skill when I met him in early March 2004. At the time, he had been the Minister of Culture and Tourism for a little more than a year and I interviewed him for a film magazine. He seemed rather reluctant to talk about his official duties, so we didn't talk a single word about politics. The interview was more like smooth and comfortable conversation, sometimes exchanging jokes. Yet the interview wasn't published because the following week, one of the strangest political incidents in Korean history took place—the President ROH Moo-hyun was impeached. With intense public controversy over the impeachment, a leisurely conversation between a minister and a film critic didn't seem appropriate to print. The article was never published.

When I first asked LEE for the interview at that time, he was hesitant. “Do people still pay attention to me? I don't think I have anything interesting to offer,” he said. In fact, our conversation wasn't all that fun. When we talked about film, he was relaxed, but when he talked as a minister, he became discreet as usual. Once he became the Minister of Culture and Tourism, his every word was over-interpreted by some newspapers as the mouthpiece of the new government, which made him quite uneasy. When I told him that some of us thought of him as Andre Malraux, the long time French Minister of Culture, his face tensed at once. “It's illogical to compare me to Andre Malraux. I'm living in a totally different era from his. Malraux was nationally deemed to be delivering the spirits of the French resistance to the republic. French people back then were willing to listen to his ambitious plans. Whatever he said was accepted. But in my case, I can't really speak of anything now. Whenever I talk, I get blamed. I'm not afraid of being blamed, but I need to be very careful as the head of the Ministry so that my staff won't get in trouble.”

LEE Chang-dong surprised many people by accepting the ministerial position. Maybe it was natural for him to take the job since he publicly supported ROH Moo-

hyun and campaigned for him in the presidential election. LEE also used to be a substantial ideologue in advocating for the protection of screen quotas in 1990s. When he finally accepted the position after turning it down several times, a lot of people felt pity and hope at the same time. They felt pity because they would not be able to see his new films for a while, which had become a backbone of the Korean film world after *Oasis*. And they felt hope in that this ex-novelist filmmaker might be able to bring fundamental change to the Korean cultural landscape with his broader vision. Yet, in the midst of the political turmoil between the progressives and the conservatives, which had continued since the inauguration of the ROH administration, what LEE actually could accomplish looked very limited. My expectation that Korean cultural policy would undergo a liberal overhaul, vanished after the two-hour interview in his office.

LEE's office was on the third floor of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism building, the same place where PARK Jung-hee established his post-coup d'état office in 1961. Through its window, one can see the Blue House, Gyeongbokgung palace and Inwangsan mountain altogether. The view was good but the scenery wasn't all that amazing. LEE said, "Inwangsan mountain is quite unique but not very beautiful." During the interview, he seemed to feel uneasy when his staff came into the office to get his approval on official matters, and the conversation had to stop frequently due to numerous phone calls. He was displaying what a daily life routine is like for an incumbent minister. His face looked like the one of a marathon runner who still has a long way to go, but tries to hide his pain with a detached, indifferent expression. He confessed, "As a film director, my antenna has shut down." But he didn't seem to worry about it. He said, "Since I was a kid, I've been a genius at entertaining myself."

As a writer, LEE published only two books. He jokingly said that as a film director he never made films on his own; he was only motivated when other people pressured him. That is his attitude toward life, in a way of speaking. It seems that he has the power of distancing himself from whatever he does. He didn't seem to care about the power of his position as minister, and after he resigned, he didn't mind sitting in economy class instead of business class while traveling. Before he became a

minister, he wasn't interested in his fame as a film director. Even if someone told him that his film was very touching, he wouldn't feel grateful about it. Before the release of *Oasis*, he told me, "Tears are physiological. Tears might mean that a film was moving, but once the viewer leaves the theatre, those tears no longer mean anything." That is why he pretends to utilize genre conventions while employing cinematic styles and particular endings that make the viewer uncomfortable. He has been a gentle assassin aiming at the hearts of viewers who want conventional films. With *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy* and *Oasis*, he has created an exquisite paradoxical aesthetic. Although he utilizes the convention of melodrama, he doesn't allow the viewer to experience the conventional spectacle, which makes the experience more painful. He offers to hold the viewer's hand, but doesn't want them to cry easily over his films.

Getting to the end of the interview, he half jokingly defined himself as a bum pretending to be an artist. I asked him how he could manage financial pressure from his family while he didn't make much money by changing his career from high school teacher to full-time novelist to film director. He answered, "To do that, one has to reach a certain stage. The stage in which you lie down on the couch in the living room on holiday and you realize that you are just a huge bug. Whatever the situation is, you keep yourself easygoing and carefree. It's important to make others accept you as you are. But more important is that you first have to accept yourself as you are. Once you've realized this in your heart, you've perceived the truth and reached the stage." LEE, the self-proclaimed bum, possesses the ability to maintain his strong artistic self and draw a big picture. That is why, even though he has directed only three films so far, he has established himself as a leading director who attracts much anticipation.

After resigning as a minister, he disappeared from the film scene, hiding from the public view. During this time of seclusion, he finished a new script and prepared for the production of a new film, *Secret Sunshine*. Known only as an unusual love story set in a sequestered small town called Milyang (means secret sunshine in English), the film kept a low profile even though big stars like SONG Kang-ho and JEON Do-youn starred. The new film, without LEE Chang-dong's personas, SUL

Kyoung-gu and MOON So-ri, will be a turning point for him after a long interlude. I was curious how it would turn out, but didn't visit the set. Many years ago, I had been to the set of *Peppermint Candy* and saw LEE directing from a distance. He looked very busy and stressed out with a tense face. His literary friends came by to cheer him up, but they couldn't even talk to him because the atmosphere was so tense.

LEE's film sets are notorious for the amount of concentration and endurance they require. According to MOON So-ri, working with LEE was a "time of suffering." LEE corners the actors and pushes their thoughts and feelings around until they confront, give up and accept everything. However, even though working with LEE is an awful experience for actors, they feel like coming back when it ends, just like a drug addict. Being a pessimistic perfectionist, LEE always starts from scratch if something is not right. Even when the staff and actors don't understand why they have to do it all over again, they admire and trust his artistic will, which he exercises even under extreme duress. MOON said, "When he told us to start over from the beginning, none of us understood. But we started over anyway and that's the power he has. He questions what he believes and then flips the situation—that's amazing."

Director RYOO Seung-wan, who played a role as a supporting actor in *Oasis*, has once talked about how LEE drove everyone crazy on the set. LEE was explaining how Jong-du's brother should hit Jong-du (SUL Kyoung-gu) at the police station, and the director actually did hit SUL. The atmosphere on the set seemed about to explode. The look in LEE's eyes changed all of sudden and his aggression erupted and swooped down the set. But then, he instantly regained his composure. All the staff members were shocked but SUL remained calm. Even when they weren't shooting, SUL always wore Jong-du's clothes and inhabited his character. Whenever they disagreed, SUL and LEE negotiated like fellow artists. The staff said that even though there were many painful moments in working with LEE, a sort of artistic community was created in the process. RYOO was impressed that LEE never gave in or compromised with his actors, but always argued with them and maintained

tension. LEE was leading the scene with great strength while he left himself open to stimulus from outside.

LEE confesses that he feels great pain on film sets, as if he is entering hell. In spite of all that, he chose to be a film director because he found it too hard to write novels. Writing novels requires one to disentangle thoughts in his head and translate them into words. He says that, although he has many things in his head, once he sees a blank piece of paper, his brain turns off and he can't remember anything. But as for film, actors and staff actualize his thoughts for him. That is why he likes his job as a film director. But still, he suffers on set. The reason why he endures the painful creative process is because LEE is searching for his own fantasy—his final exit. It's not easy for the audience to find the exit of the fantasy he is leading to. While LEE adopts a popular exterior form in his films, he invites his audience to go through the test with the litmus of his own style. And only they who passed the test get rewarded with unique pleasure his films provide.

From my most recent conversation with LEE Chang-dong, I found that he had become much more pessimistic about the present and future of film as a medium of communication. Before LEE entered the film world, he was involved in theatrical directing and wrote novels. He was not a film maniac, nor did he fall in love with film at first. In his youth, he was an aspiring writer with significant experience in theatrical circles due to his elder brother who was a theatre director. After graduating from college, he worked as a high school teacher and later became a full-time writer. After publishing two novels, he entered the film circle. LEE first worked with director PARK Kwang-su as a scriptwriter and then worked as an assistant director for PARK's *To the Starry Island*. After that he quit writing and became a director. As an artist with a broad range of knowledge in the humanities, he felt the limitations of the novel and turned to filmmaking, which brought him great success. His debut film *Green Fish* achieved critical acclaim and *Peppermint Candy*, selected as the opening film at the Pusan International Film Festival, made LEE internationally known. LEE has achieved rapid success as a film director, yet, he himself doesn't care about this achievement. He doesn't try to be humble, but he is. Whenever I told him of the importance of his films, he questioned if that was really the case.

“Suppose the film people and intellectuals would understand my films, but how many people would that be?”

“At least a third of the audience would understand your films.”

“That’s an overestimation.”

“Under the current system of commercial distribution, it is inevitable that films are largely misunderstood by the masses and only understood by a few. And only after some time, they are endowed with multiple meaning and constantly re-evaluated.”

“That may be the case, but I think film itself is losing its power as a medium of communication as you can see in my films for example. There is no mystery left for film. We filmmakers have spoiled the audience. People don’t like ambiguous films. They used to respect them and pay attention to what they were saying, but, now, the audience gets angry. It’s not just the Korean audience. I think it’s a worldwide phenomenon. Only elders watch serious films in Europe. Young people watch American films.”

LEE told me how shocked he was as a judge at the Rotterdam Film Festival.

“I felt a little bored, because I had to watch only competing films. So I asked around for a good movie outside of the competition and found one. It was a Romanian film and I was extremely moved by it. It was a story about a hospital and very well directed. It was a serious film and ethically flawless. But, surprisingly, nobody paid attention to it. Most of the audience found it boring and none of the critics or filmmakers talked about it, which was even more shocking to me. The fact that a good film like that doesn’t stimulate people at all was shocking. Since then, just how I am supposed to communicate with people through film has been my big concern.”

We talked about the present and future of cinema in a global aspect. He was sensing the end of the cinema era, which he had a favorable feeling toward. He was pessimistic about the reality of Korean films, too. “To be honest, the future of Korean cinema is not very bright. Korean blockbuster films are eating up other Korean films. It’s getting more difficult to see the emergence of young directors like HONG Sang-soo and KIM Ki-duk. The Korean film scene needs to seriously

embrace diversity regardless of nationality.”

It seemed like his pessimism was endless. But strangely, his pessimism didn't make me feel helpless; rather it felt contagious and even a bit optimistic. He is not some kind of cynic who just criticizes everything around him. He is a kind of person who soaks himself into a reality and endures patiently even though he is cynical of it. The words that he spits out have an optimistic attitude that prepares him for the worst situations. Even if he says he might have to give up making films, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, I wouldn't be too worried. If he stops, I would be disappointed, but I know he would pursue another form of art. He changed his vocation from teacher to novelist to film director to minister, but his roots are as an artist. Although he is not interested in fame and is skeptical about the viability of art, he still clings to the potential of communication, feeling despondent about his fate as an artist.

LEE's films are not always fully supported by the critics in Korea, nor do they receive popular acclaim from the general audience. The characteristics of his films have prevented them from receiving universal praise.

“I've been criticized since my first film came out. What can I do? I just get criticized. The most frequent criticism is that my films are an extension of literature, meaning they aren't cinematic enough. That may be true. But now, I think my films need to be even simpler.”

LEE's films are not made with the intention of becoming a part of international film history; rather, they focus on the possibilities of communication and the ambiguity of contemporary art. Nowadays, everything claims to be a form of communication in the name of entertainment and popular opinion. And LEE is the kind of artist who deliberately chooses to oppose this. For him, name recognition can't be an obstacle. In that respect, he is a real artist who deserves admiration.

LEE seems to feel uncomfortable with the shadows around his fame. People often ask, “Are you LEE Chang-dong, the director who was minister?” He just smiles without saying anything. LEE doesn't pretend to be a famous person. He even regards praise as poison and tries to distance himself from his admirers. People who criticize his films think they are the product of dysphemistic expression. On the

other hand, people who favor his films think of them as ardent expressions of seriousness. LEE's films directly insist that through agony, despair and loss, we are able to see hope. According to LEE, "*Secret Sunshine* is a much more normal and simple film." Without haste, LEE's upcoming films will display his artistic maturity; his fundamental attitude which balances life with cinematic honesty will always make his audiences tense.



On the **Director**

As a film critic, I sometimes encounter a director who I want to challenge. Director LEE Chang-dong is that kind of director. Although I'm not 100 percent in support of his cinematic technique, I am touched by his films and I cannot exactly figure out why. That is why I want to challenge him. His cinematic structure has plot lines and metaphorical images that seem too perfect, which makes me feel completely contained inside the film. When films rely on an artificial structure, they tend to fall into a structural trap that fails to reverberate emotionally. LEE's films delicately escape from this trap. So when I meet him, I feel a strong urge to uncover his secret formula.

LEE Chang-dong, a former novelist, is a highly articulate person. His words from casual conversation could become beautiful prose if dictated. While talking to him, I realize that he is trying to create something new within a familiar framework, which he and his audience have established together. Take *Oasis* for example, the tightly woven plot seems to leave no space for interpretation, but the film's subject matter—the love between an ex-convict and a woman with cerebral palsy—is painful because of its sheer physicality. The film tries to find beauty in the ugly flesh of socially marginalized and despised people, which is considered to be very ambitious. On the other hand, despite the emotional escalation of the audience, the film ends in a very flat tone, and this also can be considered ambitious. The audience is ready to cry, but the director discourages them from doing so. The fictionalized world in LEE's films seems perfectly real, but, in fact, they are governed by his fictionalized

logic. There is no room for escape in that world. It is no wonder I wanted to challenge his world view.

Once I mentioned to him that although Japanese director Kitano Takeshi's loosely filmed *Kikujiro* was, in fact, despondent of reality, it had a 'that's okay' kind of attitude. I told him that, compared to *Kikujiro*, *Oasis* is overly obsessed with reality. As a matter of fact, LEE's films are often haunted by the trace of heavy contemplation that is constrained to reality. LEE smilingly answered, "Takeshi throws jokes at the world, while I take everything seriously. But who likes a stiff who only talks about serious stuff?! You make a fool out of yourself by saying things people already know but choose not to talk about. They don't like it because it's painful and then I act as if I'm the only one who knows, which bothers people. And here I am, still taking things seriously and giving you a serious talk" And he laughed.

In Takeshi's films, which usually go unscripted, the camera often gazes absent-mindedly at the characters while there is little action from them. This kind of loose structure allows for a certain amount of freedom, but Takeshi claims that he did so only to make the film long enough. Of course, he was joking, but when I told LEE about this, he made serious face and said, "That's a lie. Takeshi's films have a carefully calculated rhythm and tempo, which creates an intimacy with the audience. This technique is from Noh, classical Japanese drama. Nothing seems to happen, but suddenly there is a burst of action. This form appeals to Western audience, but would be nothing new for the Japanese."

In fact, Takeshi's films are not very popular in Japan. Yet, I don't think it is because his films don't provide anything new to Japanese audience as LEE suggested. What makes them unpopular is his pessimistic and dissenting attitude that, the world sucks, so I'm just going to make jokes about it. The Japanese don't buy his jokes because they can often find Takeshi in TV comedies. Whereas his comedy routines are provocatively biting and slapstick, his films have an almost meditative feel on the other hand. In that sense, LEE and Takeshi have something in common. One talks seriously and the other jokes, but their destination is the same. Both of them present a new world to those feeling not very comfortable with it and elicit emotional response from them. What we are seeing does not necessarily represent the

truth in our world and the same applies to films as well. It is surprising to see that LEE's serious films convey more optimism than Takeshi's jesting films. Behind a serious face, LEE's films furtively suggest humor and sorrow—a double-sided aspect which is well represented in Jong-du in *Oasis*, played by SUL Kyoung-gu, who giggles throughout the film, but dazzles and moves the audience.

This conveys the true shape of our mundane world, which can't be simplified. His films may seem to present a world of despair, but they are optimistic. They lie between optimism and pessimism, affirmation and negation, joy and sorrow, empathy and apathy, and real and surreal. His tightly woven films embrace numerous semantic and emotional aspects, which allow the audience to experience several layers of meaning and emotion. Up until now, this is the most virtuous thing by which LEE's films have abided.

LEE began his film career as a scriptwriter and assistant director of *To the Starry Island* directed by PARK Kwang-su. As a contemporary of PARK, LEE entered the literary world in the 80s while PARK entered the film world. When LEE came onto the film scene, PARK was already one of the most influential directors, leading “the New Korean Cinema” along with JANG Sun-woo. Even though LEE participated in PARK's another film, *A Single Spark* as a scriptwriter before debuting with *Green Fish*, he has little in common with PARK.

LEE Chang-dong has made three films so far, and his fourth film is about to be released. Korean cinema has changed significantly since he began his career. Directors from the Korean New Wave of the late 80s to mid 90s, such as PARK Kwang-su, JANG Sun-woo and JUNG Ji-young, have all been losing ground considerably. PARK has since to recover from his failure, *LEE Jae-seui Nan*. The counter-cinematic JANG, who made the daring anti-structuralist films *Bad Movie* and *Lies*, saw his latest experimental film, with a ten million dollar budget, *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* tank at the box office. Both PARK and JANG once held dominant positions in the industry, where they exercised complete creative control and attracted A-list Korean actors. It is ironic to watch their careers dwindle after they produced overwhelmingly huge projects.

Films by HONG Sang-soo and KIM Ki-duk, members of the next generation of the mid 90s, haven't experienced quite the blockbuster appeal that PARK and JANG once garnered. HONG began his career in 1996, with films that probed into the banality of everyday life. His films strongly influenced young filmmakers and provided a kind of guideline to them. But, as his microcosmic world began to take on unique patterns, he modestly repositioned himself to appeal to a particular group of audience.

Despite his international success, KIM Ki-duk's controversial films continue to attract only a limited audience in Korea. Although LEE is of the same age as PARK and JANG, he began his career around the same time as HONG and KIM did. Despite that, he differentiates himself from both groups with his idiomatic style. Even I would dare to say that he shares commonalities with the next generation of filmmakers such as PARK Chan-wook, BONG Joon-ho, KIM Jee-woon and RYOO Seung-wan, in the sense that they don't completely discard the pattern of genre conventions.

These director's films can be categorized as the "Third Way"—they still fall within a specific genre, but clearly display the director's idiosyncratic style. While the directors embrace the convention of genre, they skillfully break from the psychological causality of genre films. This is similar to the films with un-happy endings made in the 70s by the New Hollywood Cinema directors. Although the contemporary Japanese director Kurosawa Kiyoshi has a similar style, the Korean directors develop large-scale narratives with unconventional endings where style is of utmost importance. For example, PARK Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* presents a confrontation between the capitalist and the worker through a kidnapping and murder in which the enemy is unclear. The film portrays despair and irony in an absurdistic style against the backdrop of a seemingly postmodern Korean society. Although this film was not popular, PARK's other film *Old Boy*, which explores incest and the destruction of family, was successful at the box office. PARK freely utilizes multiple shifting points of view, with editing and imagery that implies that the main characters are "old boys." After strongly identifying with the main character, the film turns to give us a twisted kind of pleasure as we witness the

destruction of a star actor. PARK's films probe into Korean society where political cynicism and desperation are rampant; he utilizes jump cuts and special camerawork to represent the hellish mental states of the characters.

On the other hand, BONG Joon-ho, whose *Barking Dogs Never Bite* displays the monotony of daily life in a high-rise apartment as if it were an exciting action flick, became an auteur after he made *Memories of Murder*. Although the film deals with an unsolved murder case from the 80s, the audience clings to the illusion that the murderer will be found and punished. The film uses chase scenes and tricky points of view, but at the end, it forces the audience to empathize with the defeated emotions of the detective who fails to catch the criminal. BONG brilliantly utilizes close-ups, which allow us to identify and sympathize with the detective and the murderer, and at the end of the film he cleverly blames the days as murderous.

But LEE Chang-dong's films also distinguish themselves from this new generation of directors. His films have a conventional melodramatic structure, but they tend towards realism in terms of style. His films have a conventional narrative structure—beginning, development, turn, and conclusion—but they resist simple plot lines. LEE is the kind of director who believes, “It is dangerous to explain a life with causality... The film medium has a tendency to simplify our lives and explain things according to the law of cause and effect. I think that's dangerous to filmmaking and film viewing. We need to let people contemplate the hidden essence of our lives rather than simplifying them, which can distort life itself.” LEE believes that people's lives are not merely governed by the law of cause and effect, and that fatal elements are hidden behind our mundane daily activities.

LEE's films don't seem to emphasize style; rather they oscillate between genre conventions to conjure reality. In his first film *Green Fish*, LEE condenses the history of Korean civilization into the structure of a gangster noir. In *Peppermint Candy*, he presents a reversal of the cause-and-effect principle, and in *Oasis*, he utilizes a melodramatic structure to blur the distinctions between reality and fantasy. By utilizing the familiar discourse of melodrama, LEE elicits empathy from the viewer, but then forces them to reflect on the very process of empathizing through a hidden cinematic device. The image of a train moving backwards is one example that

symbolically displays LEE's strategy. At first, the viewer is not aware of the meaning of this image; but as the shot is repeated, we get the sense that the reversed movement of the train reflects the structure of the plot—time reversal—and, at the same time, functions as a visible cinematic apparatus that resists the irreversibility of the story.

LEE's films scripts are so impeccably structured that they could be used in college film courses. All his scripts have precisely planned introductions, developments, turns and conclusions with escalating rhythms that rush to a dramatic end. In *Green Fish*, Mak-dong (HAN Seok-gyu), recently discharged from the military, rides a train home and encounters Mi-ae (SHIM Hye-jin) when her red scarf blows off and becomes tangled around his head. As if drawn to an unexpected destiny, Mak-dong meets Mi-ae in Yeongdeungpo, where he experiences the harsh rules of a decaying city governed by gangsters. A fatalistic romance is added to this gangster flick, in which LEE has condensed Korean history. Mak-dong cheerfully returns to his hometown only to find things have changed. Countless numbers of apartments have replaced the acacia forest, and his family, now scattered around the town, is busy making ends meet. He tells his mother to stop working as a housekeeper and brags about making money even though he hardly does anything. For the naïve and gentle Mak-dong, family is the most important thing; but his family, who have become hardened by their difficult lives, fight with each other during a picnic on his mother's birthday.

In the 70s, Yeongdeungpo, where Mak-dong meets Mi-ae, experienced an urban renewal. Here, Mak-dong meets BAE Tae-gon (MOON Sung-keun), Mi-ae's lover and gangster leader. BAE grew up as an orphan, but is now a self-made man—CEO of a legal enterprise. BAE takes Mak-dong to a soon-to-be demolished building and tells him the story of how he went to jail because he stole food and ate it in this building when he was a child. Fair or foul, BAE did everything he could to obtain the building, which he plans to rebuild, and he teaches Mak-dong how to succeed in the real world. In the future, Mak-dong may become more like BAE, but ironically, BAE may have been like Mak-dong in the past. In this film, LEE utilizes day scenes



Green Fish, 1996

in Ilsan (Mak-dong's hometown), and night scenes in Yeoungdeungpo. While Ilsan now occupies a space of hope, Yeoungdeungpo has become a microcosm of a monstrous society. The noir images of Yeoungdeungpo serve as a perfect metaphor for Korean society. BAE and Yeoungdeungpo may be the future of Mak-dong and Ilsan. Mak-dong is different from BAE because of his innocent dreams. The same goes for Mi-ae, who rides the train to get away whenever things get tough. Mak-dong and Mi-ae mimic melodramatic love formulas in the way they yearn for a romantic escape from their harsh reality.

Green Fish has a clear story line: Ilsan and Yeoungdeungpo represent Korean society in the 70s and 90s respectively. BAE makes his way through the corrupt world as a criminal, while the young and innocent Mak-dong has just entered the decaying world. The beautiful Mi-ae is not sure of either world and slowly breaks down. The narrative style contrasts character and setting against the backdrop of gangster noir images. Family tradition and conflicts in modernized Korean society are projected onto the main character's family. The element of romance is added, but the real world is presented in contrast, where romance is not possible. The story line

never gets ahead of the audience and sometimes even feels naïve. LEE makes Mak-dong a tragic hero and we get the sense that he is reluctant to describe Mak-dong as being dominated by evil forces. The irony of the good-natured Mak-dong going down in flames is so dramatic that it feels rather typical. The film's weakness lies in its analysis of the system because it sympathizes with the characters' mental states. Like Michael in *The Godfather*, Mak-dong desperately devotes himself to the gangster life for the sake of his family, but the film doesn't really comment on the essence of the business. Because of this, Mak-dong changes very little in the film. He is faithful to his principals and fights to the end against the transgressive reality. In this respect, BAE is more realistic than Mak-dong. The rule of gangster genres is absent in the film—that is, a character who struggles to succeed in the gangster world by depersonalizing himself perfectly represents the capitalistic business system. However, the film, which partly borrows from the Hollywood genre narrative, shows the director's intention of presenting Korea's reality and strangely draws on sentimentality. Those in their late 30s and intellectuals in their 40s usually cry during the film. Yet LEE creates distance from the characters. He ignores the gangster flick logic, which makes the protagonist a tragic hero. Mak-dong is too innocent and can never be a villain. He never becomes a real gangster and meets with a tragic end while keeping his faith. This is because Mak-dong is a Korean-style guy. He is a 70s-style Korean who can't stand injustice and chooses destruction even though he knows he is going to lose. Mak-dong, who is a displaced-90s guy, is more innocent than BAE. Despite LEE's ambition to achieve the intensity of a realistic film rather than delivering the pleasure of a genre film, his characters are simply drawn.

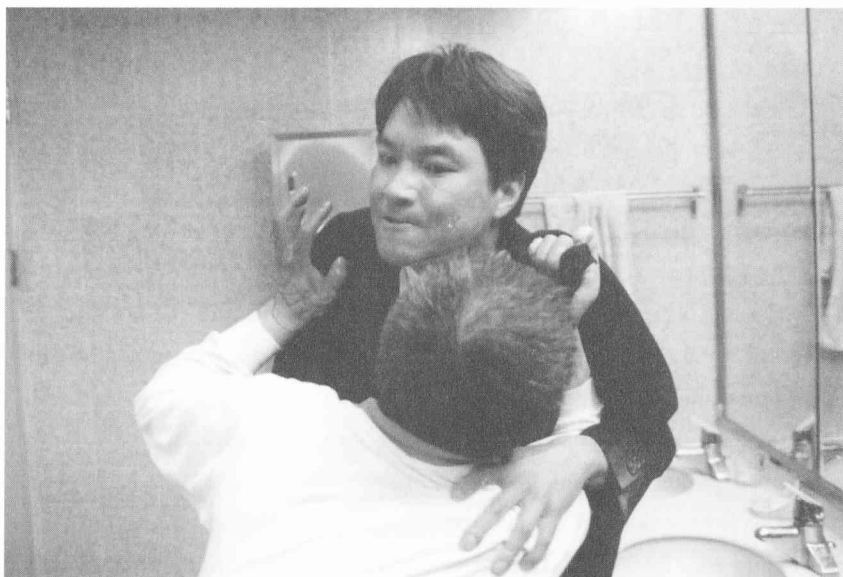
In this film, LEE, a former novelist, displays a visual imagination that is locked into the literary paradigm. In the last part, Mak-dong, on orders from BAE, kills the boss of the rival gangster group. After committing the crime, he calls home from a telephone booth, agitated. When Mak-dong's brother, who suffers from cerebral palsy, answers the phone, Mak-dong shares his childhood memories as if in monologue, desperately clinging to the nostalgic past, all the time afraid they might be disconnected. He has no future now—he will either die or go to prison soon. As

he continues telling his brother, who might not understand, about his memories, which are frozen like fossils, it is as if he is forcing himself to say that they were happy in those days. In the narrow, fragile space of the transparent telephone booth, although these memories seem trivial to the audience, Mak-dong speaks as if it will be his last monologue.

If Mak-dong's life is a feeble life exposed in a telephone booth, BAE's life resembles the ruins of Yeoungdeungpo. When he orders Mak-dong to commit murder, BAE looks back into his past from the dilapidated roof of the building and acts as if he rules the universe. He is a man of power but he is like an old building that can be demolished at any time.

Although both BAE and Mak-dong talk about their ideals, they function together as the exploiter and exploited. BAE exploits Mak-dong but he is also being exploited by his former boss. When he meets a rival boss during an official dinner, he gets beat up and his nose bleeds, but he swallows the insult submissively in front of his followers. The only governing laws in this world are survival of the fittest and betrayal—it's an endless chain of exploitation. BAE tells Mak-dong to kill the rival boss but when Mak-dong accomplishes the task, he takes Mak-dong to a dim corner and stabs him to death. Unlike Mak-dong, BAE's life goal is to completely control people. He has an illusion that this goal is his ideal. Mak-dong is killed by his naïve simple-mindedness; he believes that loyalty to his boss will ensure his family's well-being. After he is stabbed, Mak-dong stumbles to the car, where BAE and Mi-ae sit, and dies with a pained face. The camera coldly captures his cruel death as he steams the windshield with his last breath. He dies on the street as if he were an abandoned dust cloth, and we hear Mi-ae's scream. Once tenderly passionate with him, she cries because Mak-dong has paid an awful price trying to escape from his abject reality. The foolish young man who failed to predict his future has died a gruesome death. Mi-ae is also foolishly wasting her time. They both have lost the ability to be happy in the world.

Here, we can find a unique paradox that occurs throughout LEE's films. Although he introduces plots and characters that may seem typical, in the process of creating conflict through contrasting characters and incidents, he plays around with



⋮ *Green Fish*, 1996
⋮

these typical aspects and manipulates them. *Green Fish* combines romantic drama with gangster flick where young people find themselves restrained in a decaying world. From here, LEE goes even further. He cuts off any attempt the viewer might make to find innocence in the unsuccessful romance between Mak-dong and Mi-ae. LEE sees Mak-dong's innocence as a foolish and a vain desire to deviate. Mak-dong wants to escape to a better world, but only has a feeble grip on his own reality. When he is discharged from the army, his family ignores him while he brags about giving them a better future. He tells his mother, to no avail, not to work as a housekeeper. He lectures his sister, at the coffee shop where she's a waitress, not to work even though she gives him money. And in denial of his own failures, he visits his elder brothers to tell them to make their families happy. Nobody listens to him. In the middle of the film, the family goes to a much-anticipated picnic, where the alcoholic elder brother starts a fistfight which spoils everything. All Mak-dong can do is drive the elder brother's car around in circles. The camera is placed inside the circling car and captures the family members fighting. This shot from Mak-dong's point of view

is a direct metaphor for his foolish inabilities; he is forever banished to the periphery of his family, where he circles around and around in frustration.

Mak-dong is in love with Mi-ae, but Mi-ae lacks the ability to dream like Mak-dong. Even though she can't sing well, she sings in a nightclub where the customers ridicule her. Sometimes she rides the train at night without knowing her destination. This, however, doesn't symbolize her desperation; rather, it's a vain gesture on her part. Perhaps she is emulating a heroine in a movie. By riding on a filthy local train, she might be wallowing in her own self-pity. When she asks Mak-dong to ride the night train with her, they act as if they are happy lovers for a short while. But soon BAE pages Mi-ae and she gets off the train to call him from a telephone booth. She tells Mak-dong that BAE wants her to go back right away. Then she asks Mak-dong what she should do. He reluctantly says if the boss wants us now, we should go back. Though uncalled for, Mi-ae sneers at his answer. While Mak-dong blindly follows his boss, Mi-ae's life has been taken over by BAE. When Mi-ae sneers, she is also ridiculing herself. Even as Mi-ae and Mak-dong pretend they're romantic idealists, they don't have the ability to make their dreams come true.

BAE, who uses Mak-dong as his lackey, sincerely hates Mak-dong's foolishness. BAE is crafty and talks endlessly about his success and life philosophy, and acts like a big shot, when, in fact, he is a third-class gangster relegated to the outskirts of Seoul. He seems to miss the innocent days of his past. When he sleeps with Mi-ae, he feels a wound on her flesh. On the surface, he appears to be sad that he is to blame for the wound, but perhaps he is just nostalgic about the past when they were together. While his words soothe her pain, they also nurse his self-pity. He enters into his mid-life with a cruel but servile face that attempts to defy reality. LEE doesn't allow us any space to identify with his characters. He constantly reminds the viewer of Mak-dong and Mi-ae's foolishness under the pretense of their innocence. LEE also shows us the obsequious side of BAE pretending to be a big shot, which is a throwback to the gangster movies where the gangsters are idolized. BAE takes his lover to his former gangster boss and forces her to sleep with him. All that is left of him is his cunning instinct for survival and the brutal urge to control.



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Green Fish, 1996
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In comparison to *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy* is a much more ambitious film. Chosen as the opening film at the Pusan International Film Festival, it resembles *Green Fish* with its tight, claustrophobic story line. In the first chapter of the film, the protagonist KIM Young-ho chooses to kill himself, at which point the mood and tone of the film are established and set. To the viewer, Young-ho is already a miserable man, and nothing can change that. Even though he cries out on the railroad tracks, “I wanna go back!” he can’t go back. He has had a miserable life, and we don’t find out why until we see the scene of the Gwangju Uprising.

Peppermint Candy jumps back in time from 1979 to 1999; it reverses twenty years of a man’s life. As if creating a mystery, the film presents Young-ho’s secrets in the context of Korean history. While searching for the protagonist’s secret, the plot, which reverses the structure of the story in order to maintain tension, distances the viewers from the protagonist’s circumstances and history. If we chronologically rearrange the reverse timeline of *Peppermint Candy*, it can be said that the protagonist’s life of misfortune began during the Gwangju Uprising. His life functions as a tragic representation of Korean contemporary history, where he is

forced to suppress demonstrators. This experience leaves him horribly scarred. When the origin of his trauma is revealed, Young-ho could be an archetypal figure who embodies all of recent Korean history. But the film intentionally avoids this obvious storytelling convention by presenting the story in reverse, from 1999 to 1979. The objective of the film's narrative structure, which deconstructs causality, is to resist the causal relationship between the individual and history; at the same time, it tries to accurately describe history as a metaphor, which is a contradiction. LEE isn't trying to present the outcome of this tragic history; rather, he wants to contemplate the innocent moments before the actual tragedy. The fact that he doesn't hide his attempts to do this reveals his vain desire.

The film's technique of mystery-telling is the framework through which personal history and Korean history merge and overlap. Although we can't ever fully understand Young-ho's life, we get to know more about him as the film continues. After a significant amount of time passes, the viewer can understand some of Young-ho's emotions—sorrow, despair, self-torture, self-destruction, and his hidden passion for purity. The mystery-telling technique, along with the reversed structure, work together as a directional force, encouraging the viewer to experience the events rather than trying to understand them logically. By inviting us to experience the film in this way, *Peppermint Candy* reaches into another aesthetic dimension.

After intensely arousing us visually, an image dies out and becomes locked in the frame. Susan Sontag once said that when she was looking at photographs of Bergen-Belsen at age 12—which she found by chance in a Santa Monica bookstore—she was so deeply moved that her life became divided into before and after seeing the photographs. But after the initial shock is gone, the image, which contains unimaginable pain and agony, loses ground. This is the fate of an image that deals with historical truth—it degenerates and enervates. For several decades, Sontag said that photographs can dull people's consciousness just as much as they can incite them.

Unlike photographs, which arouse through an image, *Peppermint Candy* is a film that attempts to incite the viewer by telling a story through images. However, unlike conventional films that try to affect the viewer through a causal narrative, the events

and images in this film enable us to experience it moment by moment rather than trying to understand it logically. At the same time, with an ending that freezes an image from the past, it rejects the theory that history progresses and bitterly confesses that our futures won't improve upon the past.

Peppermint Candy allows us to experience a personal history within the larger historical context, and, in turn, this personal history reminds us of historical incidents. Amazingly, the entire process is filled with historical metaphors from the last twenty years. KIM Young-ho, who prospered in the 90s capitalist bubble economy, goes belly up when the market crashes, and becomes a scapegoat. As a policeman, Young-ho, who brutally tortures a suspect, is a servant of the fascist dictatorial government of the 80s. While in the military, he accidentally kills a high school girl and unknowingly becomes both a victim and perpetrator of this dictatorship. Young-ho isn't hostile toward any other characters, but his position oscillates between victim and perpetrator depending on the historical context. When he's standing in the parking lot, pointing a gun at his senior co-worker who swindled money from him, the screen doesn't exactly differentiate between Young-ho and his senior. Young-ho is a confused monster, a criminal and victim at the same time. Here, the camera attempts to peek into the human soul of a man who doesn't know what to do in his predicament.

Another obvious metaphor is the foot wound Young-ho suffers in the Gwangju incident. The wound symbolizes the scars left behind from an amorphous history. Whenever he suffers a mental shock, his limp from the injury returns—when he sees his first love Sun-im on her deathbed, when he makes love to a woman who resembles Sun-im. Whenever something moves him, the scar manifests itself physically. This metaphor emerges repeatedly, quietly emphasizing that our individual lives are forever bound to history. The scar continues to manifest throughout Young-ho's life as a soldier, policeman and lowbrow capitalist. His life's path, in which the viewer is unable to intervene, is symbolic. But, paradoxically, the image of Young-ho walking with a limp enriches the story—it arouses us. In every scene, these emotional layers enrich the film with symbolism.

In *Peppermint Candy*, numerous scenes are arranged according to the law of



Peppermint Candy, 1999 ⋮

emotional contrasts. When Young-ho tortures a suspect for the first time, Sun-im visits him at the police station. The suspect faints from the pain and defecates on Young-ho's hand. Sun-im talks about Young-ho's hands as he sits in silence. "Your hands are not pretty but they look innocent..." Young-ho coldly rejects her love.

Upon leaving the train station, she hands him a camera he once wanted. When he rejects the camera, his soul is once again damaged. That night, Young-ho rides a bike endlessly in front of a diner where his fellow detectives are eating. As if making an eloquent speech about his dead-end life, Young-ho circles around and around the empty lot. One of his co-workers sings an old song at the diner. "She was waving her pretty hands and smiling, but I saw the tears in her big black eyes. Leaning against the carriage window, she couldn't even say goodbye. She just turned around and cried." Young-ho enters the diner riding on the bike, and shouts waving a gunnysack, "Halt! Attention! Parade rest! Bad recital!..." In the next scene, Young-ho and Hong-ja, a waitress in love with him, have sex in a cheap motel. Afterwards, the camera shoots her from above as she ends the day with her prayers. Young-ho feels as if he is both in heaven and hell. From above, the camera's gaze is cold and dry, when it could

have been warm and exciting. There is no trace of sympathy or any longing for salvation.

Peppermint Candy is divided into seven chapters, which can't be easily explained, and it frequently takes us into an emotional free fall from heaven into a bottomless pit. The film carefully arranges contrasting events to reveal traces of fatal destruction and to carve historic scars into seemingly mundane landscapes. In the fourth chapter, Young-ho, newly married to Hong-ja, descends the stairs in front of a gate where children are playing in a small pool. The water imagery appears again at a public bathhouse where a friend of a fugitive, PARK Myeong-sik, is found. After PARK is arrested, Young-ho strips and tortures him with water in an interrogation room. The mundane and peaceful images of water transform into an instrument of the state vs. the individual. In the background, a radio host says, "While we are living, we sometimes make mistakes that we shouldn't make. And we hide those mistakes from loved-ones. We'll hear stories like that today. The first call is from...hello...?" After this scene, Young-ho sings a song called "Love" with a coquettish voice in a karaoke

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Peppermint Candy, 1999



bar—“My love, beautiful like a star, we had a love like a dream, and then you went away like the wind...”

The unique storytelling technique of contrasting selected combinations of particular images and events creates the emotional tenor of the film. When Young-ho goes to Gunsan to arrest a suspect, he stops by a café and makes love to the owner after a dull conversation about their first loves. This scene is filled with an amazingly naïve sentimentality in contrast to the rest of the film. Here, Young-ho and the café owner talk about rain and images of water as the means to understand love—“I’m sorry it’s raining.” “That’s okay. She’s exposed to the same rain as me so she’ll be seeing the same rain.” The next morning, Young-ho arrests the suspect. When he cleans the suspect’s blood-stained face in the car, the suspect coughs up blood. Simultaneously, the café owner waits to have breakfast with Young-ho on the beach. By juxtaposing these scenes of leisure and tension, of warm moments and violence, several layers of emotion are created.

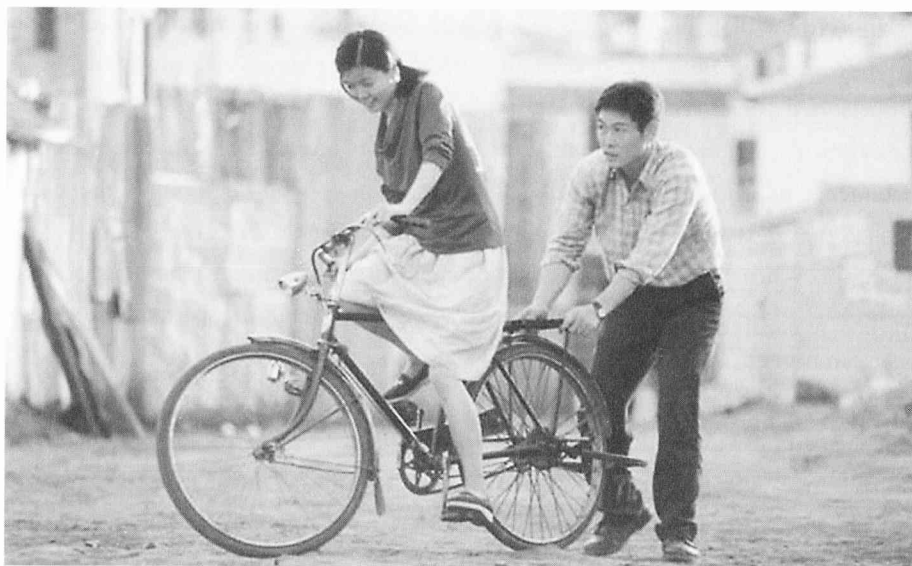
Picnic, the last chapter of the film, shows 20-year-old Young-ho at a picnic with his friends. He slips away from them and lies down in the grass. The scene ends with Young-ho’s faint tears, as if the 20-year-old Young-ho were saddened by the death of the 40-year-old Young-ho. What is unique is that this is the very moment when Young-ho’s hope in life and the political turmoil around him are about to collide. The film ends in an innocent time before the tragedy. The last scene is exceptional because it allows Young-ho to be happy for the first time. Chronologically, the story is tragic because the protagonist meets with a miserable death; but according to the logic of the plot and the ending, the film is about the search for innocence. In the picnic scene, the young Young-ho looks like he knows the fate of the older Young-ho. Here, an external force wants time to freeze in 1979, a more innocent time. The film asks if we can begin from a frozen past instead of seeking salvation from our present. But we know the past can’t be rewound or frozen. The desire to fix moments in time is the kind of innocence Mak-dong displays in *Green Fish* when he talks about his childhood memories as he dies in a phone booth. In the picnic scene, Young-ho tells Sun-im that he feels as if he has been there before—the same place he will visit twenty years later. Sun-im says, “Sometimes that happens. They say that’s

because you've seen it in your dreams." Life is a dream. Or if you wish your life were a dream, then it is a nightmare. *Peppermint Candy* seeks to transform our nightmares into dreams that haven't been actualized.

The year 1979 holds the memory of Young-ho's first love. By using 1979 as its fulcrum, and by centering on a time of both historical crisis and personal dreams, *Peppermint Candy* invites us into a past that could have led to another present, which differs from the actual present. Although that past is determined by a first love—an abstract emotional memory—it manages to bring us into a softer emotional state that can't be hardened by historical facts. This is the result of a struggle—which tries to connect personal stories with a tragic history—overexposed by the media and overlooked by others. On the surface, *Peppermint Candy* seems to be a conventional film about a man within a historical backdrop, when, in fact, it enters the realm of reconstructing an experience that is free from the chain of cause and effect.

In LEE's films, the characters are not allowed to enter other worlds. They walk into a predetermined fatalism. Mak-dong in *Green Fish* circles around two cities, which are essentially the same—Ilsan, his changed hometown and the industrialized Yeoungdeungpo. Young-ho in *Peppermint Candy* meets his tragic end after he attempts to escape from dictatorship and lowbrow capitalistic society. LEE's protagonists, who live in a closed world where failure is expected, desperately cling to their values. In *Green Fish*, Mak-dong hangs on to a romantically innocent faith, which includes his unrequited love for Mi-ae. In *Peppermint Candy* the case is different for Young-ho. He is drafted into the military in Gwangju and during the dictatorship, he is posted to the anti-communist department of the police. After that, he goes down in flames when his stock investments tank in the market. Young-ho had always been closed off to recent Korean history, and pays a price when his humanity is ruined. It is not the world that gives him redemption; it is the reversed time structure of the plot that gives salvation. Being a victim of historic events, Young-ho barely escapes divine punishment through this plot structure.

Oasis is also different from LEE's first two films. In this film, there is no trace of romanticism or any attempts at salvation. Although the film is not stylized, it has an



Peppermint Candy, 1999

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optimistic tone. LEE seduces us into seeing an idealistic fantasy of love, while presenting the most miserable reality on screen at the same time. The socially inept Jong-du, an ex-convict, tries to apologize to his victim's family, and in the process meets Gong-ju, who has cerebral palsy. Strangely enough, he is physically attracted to her and seems to fall in love. After a puzzling beginning, the film keeps the viewer uncomfortable as they witness the romance and its countless trials—a romance destined to be rejected by society.

Oasis uses symbolism to allure the viewer. Jong-du sees a faded, old-fashioned painting of an oasis hanging in Gong-ju's room, a metaphor for their fantasies and dreams. Every night, tree branches in front of her apartment cast shadows on the painting. Whenever Gong-ju says the shadows scare her, Jong-du promises to get rid of them with his magic; but when he says the magic words, of course the shadows stay. In *Oasis*, the characters cling to their own fantasies. The shadows on the painting, and his attempts to eliminate them, function as a perfect visual motif in

relation to the plot. Jong-du falls in love with Gong-ju, but his social position is too frail to protect a neglected woman with cerebral palsy. He has already been imprisoned for attempted rape, assault and hit-and-run, and with these three convictions, his family doesn't consider him an adult. Jong-du continues to mesmerize us with his magic spells, but like his family who finds him pathetic, we realize that it is not easy to like him. His unique personality allows him to love Gong-ju. When Jong-du desires Gong-ju, he realizes she is like a remote island that nobody else is interested in, and they both become characters in a fantasy where their love can never be realized.

Fantasy functions as the crucial entryway into *Oasis*. Before Gong-ju meets Jong-du, she fantasizes about doves flying around her room. Afterwards, Jong-du makes an abrupt appearance in her apartment. He's the insignificant savior who can actualize her fantasies. Although they love each other, they can't go on typical dates like dining out together, taking strolls or driving around—they can only dream about them. It's ironic that familiar scenes in the real world—lovers missing a train, a man serenading his lover—become a fantasy for them. These fantasies frequently appear in the film, and position themselves as equivalent to reality. They also strangely mirror this marginalized love as something fantastic, when, in reality, it's the kind of love that has very little hope. People regard their love as impossible, and as it grows, so do the social barriers. When their families find out, they don't believe it is true. To the eyes of others, Gong-ju's wish of actualizing ordinary love with Jong-du is only possible in a fantasy.

The blurred relationship between fantasy and reality allow us to see the fantasies we conjure in our real lives. The scene in which Jong-du runs into a film shoot while on a food-delivery moped, directly mocks the relationship between fantasy and reality. Jong-du amuses himself when he screams, "Filmmaking is nothing!" In fact, the "something" in his life is his love for Gong-ju. He acts like a lunatic, ignorant of the world, as he was imprisoned for the crimes of his brother. Because of his child-like innocence, he doesn't know how to clear himself of these false charges. Gong-ju also has a pure heart. She doesn't blame her brother who steals her disability pension; rather, she envies those who are able to work, and feels guilty that she can't. The

Oasis, 2002



seemingly crazy love between them is, in fact, the ideal romantic love that our superficial, spend-crazy society praises. That their love can be viewed as a fantasy is an interesting irony carefully created in *Oasis*.

Oasis utilizes familiar melodramatic conventions, where the main characters fall in love and then suffer as a result of societal pressures. It has both the limitations of a conventional film and the depth of an unconventional one. The well-formed plot perfectly merges the beginning with the end as the rhythmic structure systematically portrays the relationship between reality and magical fantasy.

When Jong-du and Gong-ju go to a karaoke bar, Jong-du gets excited and sings out loud, while Gong-ju can hardly even speak. On the way home, Gong-ju fantasizes about singing “If I Were” to Jong-du. His promise to get rid of the shadows on the painting is actualized later in the film when he climbs the tree and cuts off the branches with a saw. As their love transgresses social norms, the reality that surrounds them contrasts sharply with their actions. Jong-du nearly rapes Gong-ju early in the film, but makes real love to her later. And after their relationship is discovered, Jong-du is taken to the police station where the detective calls him a pervert.

The tightly-woven plot with its rhythmic structure may seem to portray a perfect fictional world when it is actually revealing the danger of being locked in a fictional world. The film goes further to break through this obvious symbolism with its arousing imagery. The scene where they get off the bus on the traffic-jammed Cheonggye overpass and dance in elation, presents an ironic symbolism—two socially inept people tasting momentary freedom in a lagging area of Seoul.

It is the director's gaze that gives salvation to this fictional world. LEE intersects his fictional world with reality through unflattering, gritty camerawork and amazing performances from the actors. SUL plays the complex, strange Jong-du as if he is not acting at all—he portrays a dull man with a propulsive force, seemingly ignorant with an innocent soul—while MOON recreates Gong-ju's distorted gestures with a natural ease. The straightforward morals in the film show two lovers who are about to separate. Here, the camera angle doesn't allow for any dramatic embellishment, and has no intention to convey their love through point-of-view shots. One might

attribute the detached camera work to the director's lack of affection for his characters. But no one can deny the directorial ethic which firmly distances the camera from the protagonists, presenting them as they are. The film invites us to feel what Jean-Luc Goadard once called "the ethics of montage." *Oasis* is an impressive chronicle of overlooked love. If we look deep enough inside, we can find an intense emotional vortex.

LEE's films are in the process of finding their own Holy Grail. LEE sometimes asks, as he did in *Green Fish* and *Peppermint Candy*, if it is possible to begin from the past instead of looking for salvation in the present. But the past can't be rewound into the present. At the beginning of *Peppermint Candy*, when Young-ho screams, "I wanna go back!" he wants to return to his 20s when he still had his innocent first love. It is worthy to note that this film is centered around a moment of crisis, which is more important than the unique device of time reversal. According to the protagonist's memory at this moment of crisis, the film is divided into chapters through which the viewer can re-discover the past that could have led to a completely different present-day reality. Never fading, these chapters are based on the protagonist's concrete physical memory. Experience, before it becomes memory, oscillates between crisis and opportunity. It is a live past, which tries to link itself to the present in order to create opportunity. Through an unsolidified memory, *Peppermint Candy* speaks for ordinary people shadowed by the collective ideology of society. From 1979, when state-led economic development failed, to the late 90s, when the liberal system of restructuring was attempted to recover from the IMF crisis, Korean society was in turmoil. *Peppermint Candy* shows through its portrayal of Young-ho's death that modern Korean history is a tragic space for an individual, a space that only holds the nation as than a state the subject of history and the citizen as the object. If society doesn't allow for any other identities, it would be totalitarian. LEE's films are small but measured voices that speak out against the strong voice of totalitarianism. His films move from macro to microhistory.

LEE carefully considers the pros and cons of employing these voices through the mainstream conventional film medium. For example, the backwards-moving train in

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Peppermint Candy has obvious meaning on the surface, but it also has a subtle quality hidden deeper within the narrative. Although the train clearly moves forward when we first see it, we can't determine if it is moving backward. The shot was filmed from the last compartment of the train, and shown in reverse. The viewer most likely thinks the train is moving forward unless there is a point of reference to situate them. The director could have shown us the backward moving train from the beginning, but he chose to play with our misperception of the cinematic illusion, however small it may be. The force that moves the train backwards when Young-ho yells, "I wanna go back!" comes from the authoritative power of the film mechanism. The act of going back into the past is not a result of the character's mental state but of the cinematic device itself.

These cinematic devices clash with our vision. When the train is about to run over Young-ho, it begins moving backwards and we gradually enter the layers of the past. But in front of our very eyes, the train never moves backwards. It goes forward and time passes. While it moves forward to crush Young-ho, it also moves backward into the past to avoid the crash. We can say it is a collision between the film mechanism and reality. Every moment the train seems to be moving forward, it also moves backward. It never stops in the present moment; it will forever diverge in two directions and, as a result, the collision with Young-ho may never occur. At the end of the film, Young-ho's facial expression makes it seem as if he can predict his future.

In *Oasis* when Gong-ju and Jong-du go sightseeing, Gong-ju sees a couple playing with each other on the subway. The camera slowly tilts up from Gong-ju's face to Jong-du who is holding the handrail. Suddenly, Gong-ju comes into the screen and miraculously jumps up from the chair. Before we can figure out what happened, she is acting normal again. As the film continues on, we don't know if it was a dream. Since there are no cuts dividing reality and fantasy, the continuous shot makes us uneasy. In this way, LEE deliberately blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy. He utilizes the illusory characteristic of the film medium, which questions the nature of fantasy, and exposes the structural elements hidden in most films.

When we think further of the characteristics of LEE's films, it is not clear if the

past in *Peppermint Candy*, when Young-ho screams, “I wanna go back!” is his memory right before the train hits him. Even if the viewer accepts this past as his memory in the conventional storytelling sense, it is difficult to determine whether this is actually a suppressed memory. In conventional films, we see numerous recollection scenes, but *Oasis* seems to emphasize the formal elements of the film medium. The viewer sees Young-ho’s past much later when it is conveyed through the backward moving train. The focus is not to recollect an individual’s past, but rather to utilize the film medium to move from present to past. The train seems to go forward but in fact it’s moving backward. Likewise, the story seems to be moving towards its climax, but it’s actually going into the past through a reversed chronology. This kind of structure places formal cinematic elements at the forefront. It’s the magic of the medium that answers Young-ho’s cry by reversing the film.

One of the strangest scenes in *Green Fish* is when Mak-dong talks to his mother

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⋮ *Peppermint Candy*, 1999
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after being discharged. While watching TV, Mak-dong asks his mother something, and she continues watching the TV, laughing as if she didn't hear anything. In the next scene, they don't talk to each other either. She only speaks in voice over: "Your brother waited for you all day at the bus station." And when he tells his mother the phone is ringing, she doesn't respond. Although she is the ultimate being for him, he can't communicate with her. But he continues his attempts to rebuild his family through his unrealistic imagination.

In LEE's film, the desire of entering a fantasy world constantly collides with the desire of looking at reality. In *Green Fish*, Mak-dong's fantasy of going back into the past is exploited by his boss, BAE Tae-gon. For Mak-dong, BAE is a spiritual master who facilitates Mak-dong's huge jump in social position. BAE pretends to be a teacher but in fact, he thoroughly takes advantage of Mak-dong. Mi-ae, a third-rate singer who Mak-dong thinks of as a paragon of innocence, is a vain woman who overestimates her abilities. She is a calculating person who allows herself to be BAE's sex toy. On the other hand, she constantly hides her hypocrisy as if her corrupt circumstances had nothing to do with her. When Mi-ae and Mak-dong go for a train ride, they act as if they are serious lovers. When BAE pages her to come back, Mi-ae asks Mak-dong for his opinion. When Mi-ae returns home, BAE caresses her and acts as if he is repenting for the physical violence he has subjected her to and wants to go back to his innocent days. In *Green Fish*, Mak-dong, BAE and Mi-ae are all pretending to have their own fantasy of a better future. For BAE and Mi-ae who are more realistic, these fantasies are just accessories to their vanity, but for Mak-dong it is real. He is the most foolish among the three of them. At the end of the film, accompanied by BAE, the pregnant Mi-ae visits a rural restaurant run by Mak-dong's family. She experiences déjà vu, which is barely distinguishable from Mak-dong's fantasy. On the surface, Mak-dong's family seems peaceful to Mi-ae's eyes, but their calm daily lives are in fact cruel and appalling because Mak-dong is neglected by the family members whose peace is based on his sacrifice. The casual and cozy atmosphere of the last shot in *Green Fish* displays a brutal paradox. Mak-dong's family won't be able to return to the innocent good-old days that Mak-dong dreamt about. They will still have to struggle with their cruel reality.

The discordance of one's appearance and one's essence constantly appears in LEE's films. It is a paradoxical device where fantasy and reality overlap and are subverted at the same time. In *Peppermint Candy*, having engaged in massive fratricide during the Gwangju Democratic Uprising in 1980, Young-ho is traumatized by the historical incident. He is the archetypal scapegoat who has suffered at the hands of Korean history since the 1980s. Through this archetypal figure, the film presents the Gwangju massacre, the oppressive dictatorship, and greedy violent capitalism. Young-ho is a figure that physically embodies all the scars from the historical and social memories. *Peppermint Candy* utilizes a reversed time structure to grieve for the misfortunate Young-ho who has suffered from the historical scars. In the beginning of the film, Young-ho acts like a monster, but the film ends with the pure and innocent 20-year-old Young-ho. The historical scars embodied in Young-ho's flesh are consoled and comforted briefly at the end of the film when the shy Young-ho pleasantly spends time with his co-workers on a picnic. His scream, "I wanna go back," is actualized through a cinematic flashback. But this artificial return can't completely erase the monstrous Young-ho from the beginning. The peaceful ending of the film is shocking in that it contrasts with the audience's memory of the monstrous Young-ho.

The film expresses its sorrow over Young-ho's death through the flashback—as a way to resist the absurdity and meaninglessness of life and history—but the flashback can't heal Young-ho's ultimate alienation from reality. One could say the grieving process involves reflecting and consoling on history, but unlike most popular films, the fantasy device in LEE's films constantly remind us of the intrinsic nature of our monstrous reality.

The last shot in *Oasis* is of Gong-ju cleaning her room while Jong-du narrates his letter to her. All the conflict and danger seem to be resolved in this scene which is presented right after the scene when Jong-du cuts off the branches in front of Gong-ju's apartment. He promises to make the spooky shadows in her room disappear with his magic. After sneaking away from the police station, he performs a primitive magic spell in spite of the police who try to hold him back. Then he is taken to the police station. Up until this point, the film utilizes jump cuts to reveal the fantasies

of Jong-du and Gong-ju. At the climax, Jong-du performs a realistic magic spell in real life. The following sequence shows the letter from Jong-du, now in jail, which reconfirms their love. Their love smoothly integrates with the melodramatic conclusion but the viewer is left feeling uncomfortable due to the discord between the appearance and the essence. On the surface, the film mimics a melodramatic happy ending, overcoming conflicts and difficulties and achieving a happy union. But the ending emphasizes their pain and agony in a present progressive form. Their difficult love is located in a shabby reality—it's like the fantasy of the elephant walking in Gong-ju's house, although it's not clearly shown in the film.

An elephant in a small room is surreal and nice to look at but doesn't give us any consolation. It is a fantasy for fantasy's sake. The existence of Jong-du is similar to the elephant in her house. Looking through the eyes of a child, it is a wonderful thing to have, but not possible to keep in the room nor abandon on the street. It is just a product of her fantasy. In LEE's films, fantasies are covertly impaired while interlocked with the desire to directly look into the rocky reality. The audience seems

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to easily identify with the protagonists, but upon leaving the theatre, they realize that the fantasies don't provide comfort or consolation; rather they are more like an uncomfortable mirage.

Literary rousing, which is the characteristic of LEE's films, derives from typical characters living meaningless lives at the center of history while dreaming of a different life. But his films don't go for the teleological narrative. Through rousing feelings of a helpless gaze, his films heavily undermine the essence of the teleological fantasy. With a crude essentialist attitude, LEE succeeds in hybridizing his creative self-consciousness as a novelist with his self-consciousness as a film director. On the surface, the plots in his films seem to have a tight cause and effect relation that reach a certain conclusion. By placing the present progressive aspects of time and the physical concreteness of the film at the forefront, LEE visually punishes the viewers by forcing them to look at a severely distorted woman's body, which, in turn, elevates the melodramatic process of achieving their difficult love. Accomplishing an impossible love is conceptually ideal, but because it is presented through the physically twisted body of a cerebral palsy patient, the viewers feel uncomfortable with the cinematic physicality. LEE encourages us to look at the complementary cooperative relationship between reality and fantasy from a different angle by revealing that the protagonists' fantasies are part of the viewer's mundane lives. Witnessing these fantasies is not a comfortable experience. The fantasy element of *Peppermint Candy*, which is delivered through the backward moving train, takes us into the past of the innocent protagonist; but we still have to embrace the painful reminiscence of the memories of his actions that contrast with his past innocence.

In *Green Fish*, Mak-dong's dream seems to be realized when his family members run the restaurant together at the end of the film, but it is ironic and tragic to see that Mak-dong himself is absent—we are reminded of his expendability. LEE's films let the audience know that seemingly warm and cozy endings can be painful to watch. His films place melodramatic comfort and consolation at the forefront while at the same time implicitly revealing how powerless these feelings are. The set up of the fantasy, which eases the pain of reality, also reminds us of the powerlessness of the fantasy itself. The fantasy in his films is like a bitter medicine that can ultimately

confirm our feeble gaze. At first glance, it seems sweet, but upon experiencing it we realize it's bitter, painful medicine that LEE quietly injects into the audience while he overlaps reality with fantasy. When the audience arrives at the final destination in a popular melodramatic format, they encounter a self-mocking portrait of contemporary Koreans who have engaged in self-deception and rendered helpless from the tragic chains of absurdity. Instead of criticizing them, LEE's films provide a comforting and healing ground. The kind of pain that his film delivers is not easily recognizable.

When we say that fantasy is a fundamentally defensive gesture against the meaninglessness of the world, the fantasy in LEE's films is another way to ultimately confirm that meaninglessness. Depending on their point of view, some critics may criticize LEE's fantasy device by saying it is an which is excessively twisted artificial style.

Inside of the sadness, there is a melodramatic desire and longing for justice, compensation and salvation. The process of sadness is a process of consolation through memory. It can be a kind of mourning and fantasy that fills up the meaninglessness, emptiness and absurdity of history. Life itself can't stand up against an incomprehensible history. We believe there is more than that and through this belief we try to connect ourselves to the world. It is a desire to get away from one's ultimate isolation—the meaninglessness of history and life. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, this defensive gesture is the essence of fantasy. Fantasy joins the empty world full of hostile incidents with meaningful coherence and thus allows us to endure the meaninglessness. It is a process of restoring history through sadness and tears.

As I still haven't seen *Secret Sunshine*, I can't really say much about it; but I'm assuming it will open another artistic world of LEE Chang-dong. The film is inspired by LEE Chung-joon's novel, *Story of Worm*, which closely examines a woman who loses her child to a kidnapper and the appalling process of failed salvation and forgiveness. She attempts to forgive the kidnapper who murders her child through her religious beliefs. She meets the murderer in a prison only to discover that he himself has become a devoted Christian like her. He tells her, that it



is only God who decides whether he shall be forgiven or not. The woman is shocked. At the end of the novel, she severely criticizes God because her religious values have, in fact, taken the opportunity to forgive him away from her. LEE Chang-dong's new film focuses on life after an incident rather than on the shock of the incident itself. When I met LEE, he explained why he didn't want to publicly announce that his new film is based on *Story of Worm* by LEE Chung-joon. "A novel is very different from a film. I used a motif from the short story. *Secret Sunshine* doesn't focus on the incidents. Although the female protagonist experiences traumatic incidents, she overcomes these in her own way at the beginning of the film. And then the film is about the hereafter," he said.

LEE was humble about his new film, saying everything was ordinary, and avoided giving details of the film. I had the feeling that *Secret Sunshine* would be a new turning point in his career as a filmmaker. Up until this point, LEE's films have a conscious craving for salvation even though his films have pretended otherwise.



Interview

*This interview is a compilation of three different interviews
I had with director LEE Chang-dong.
With permission from fellow critic KIM Seong-uk,
I also excerpted his interview with LEE,
which was published by Film Language (Summer 2003).
I would like to thank him for his generosity.*

KIM: Director RYOO Seung-wan, who starred as Jong-du's younger brother in *Oasis*, has said, "I admire LEE Chang-dong and his secret way of eliciting good performances from the actors." But after starring in your film, he said, "Director LEE just waits until you give him good acting." (laughs)

LEE: In fact, I don't ask for much. I'm a gentle director. (laughs)

KIM: The assistant director described you in the production journal as a macho, charismatic director, and as an artist who suffers while looking at the takes.

LEE: The filmmaking process forces me to be a macho. If a director fails to demonstrate his authority, the crew feels insecure. But in my case, people have often seen me uneasy. If I get restless, the crew and actors can feel it. My facial expressions reveal what I can't hide.

There is a fine line between a perfect shot and a mediocre shot. It's hard to explain the difference. When we communicate verbally during the production, the meaning of these things becomes limited. So the staff struggles to capture the non-verbal meaning in these moments. This is the reality of film production.

KIM: I saw a production still from *Oasis* in which you and SUL Kyoung-gu were turned away from each other. You were smoking cigarettes with uneasy



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expressions, which seemed to speak of the difficulties of the production.

LEE: The way I shot *Oasis* was different from *Peppermint Candy* and *Green Fish*. I used to plan everything out and shoot the scenes accordingly, but with *Oasis*, I tried not to script things. If I saw a pattern, I changed it. If you script things, you can only see the emotions of the main characters. We went through many takes with the supporting actors. And sometimes for the extras also. I think everything in the frame influences the main character's emotions. If their actions contradict this in any way, it can dilute the emotion. That's why I was so picky about these small details. **SUL** Kyoung-gu told me that I could only see the drawbacks. (laughs)

KIM: **MOON** So-ri said she hated you during the production because it was such a difficult process. But afterwards, these negative feelings disappeared.

LEE: It's a very risky thing for an actress to play a disabled person with cerebral palsy. I was going to scrap the project if she couldn't pull it off. She spent days with people with cerebral palsy and then she taped herself in front of the video camera. When we sat down together to watch the video, she couldn't press play. That was the first moment when I thought I would have to give up.

KIM: When are you happiest in the process of filmmaking?

LEE: Editing. It's not that I'm happy, but I feel comfortable. I must be an editing person. But of course I despair during the editing process when the raw material is bad. What's the use of editing when the source is bad...(laughs)...But in any case, editing is fun. It's painful to write the script and shoot the film. When you are writing, you dream about scouting the location. But shooting is as painful as the writing. Many directors love the production phase. They think it's fun and are eager to start shooting. I'm not like that. Maybe I'm not made to be a director. I don't enjoy the shooting process. And these emotions make people uncomfortable. Even though I don't wield authority, the atmosphere still gets too serious. Sometimes I even get confused as to whether I'm at a film shoot, in a class, or at a temple. (laughs)

KIM: Is it because you've never been satisfied?

LEE: Maybe. I tell my assistant directors that they have to risk their lives for that last 1% that makes it 100%. The invisible 1% decides everything. You might wonder about the difference between 99% and 100%, but it's the 1% that makes it 100%. It's not easy, but you have to see the 1%. Even the Bible says so. Go find the lost one... Because I reference these texts, the feeling on set gets icy. (laughs)

KIM: When you started, you were a well-known writer, but with filmmaking, you had to start at the bottom as the assistant director of *To the Starry Island* by PARK Kwang-su.

LEE: I wasn't talented but I worked hard. No doubt I had no talent. (laughs) The assistant directors of *To the Starry Island* were a dream team back then. PARK Heung-sik (*I Wish I had a Wife*), HUR Jin-ho (*One Fine Spring Day*), JANG Moon-il (*The Happy Funeral Director*), and OH Seung-wook (*Kilimanjaro*).

But things don't go well if assistant directors try to be directors. These ADs acted like counselors, worrying about trivial things—which slowed everything down—when they should have acted like sergeants. I was the only one who thought and acted like a sergeant.

KIM: Do they choose assistants who are hard working?

LEE: No. The ability or potential to be a director is the criteria. The work for an AD is harsh and not well compensated. It's an exploitation of labor. They are highly educated people who should be paid well. The exploitation doesn't pay off if they don't become a director. I think it's okay to be a mediocre AD. But I get angry when they aren't creative, when they think like a simple laborer and not like a director. The truth is, I don't usually get angry. I'm a humane director. (laughs) When we prep before the shoot, everyone is an auteur, an artist. They have their finger on the pulse of the script. But then when the shooting starts, it turns into physical labor. If they fall into this kind of industry machine, they can't escape.

KIM: *Green Fish* was a huge sensation when it was released in 1997. Very few writers became directors before you, and those who did weren't very successful. *Green Fish* was the exception. It was a mainstream, melodramatic gangster flick about rebuilding family.

LEE: That's a common misunderstanding of *Green Fish*. I wasn't trying to show the restoration of family values. Just because the naïve Mak-dong's dream is to live with his family, It doesn't mean the film is about that. I wanted to show his lack of identity. For a twenty-five-year-old, his dream is strange. He says childish things about wanting his family to be the way it was when his father was still alive. I wanted

Green Fish 1996



to emphasize how unrealistic his dream is. I wasn't saying that his dream is right, nor was I trying to rebuild a sense of family by criticizing broken families.

I wanted to convey the loss of identity among young people and among Koreans in general. Saying things like families should stay together or that modernization has fractured the family is too simple. I don't think the notion of family itself has meaning. It's like saying that daily life has value, which is a strange way of thinking. It's illogical.

KIM: Isn't the family restored through sacrifice – the death of Mak-dong?

LEE: The family is restored, but they aren't happy. If you see the ending, the couple look happy but they are still fighting. Their essence never changes. At a glance, they seem content with life but they aren't. Restoration itself has no meaning. Even if the family members live together, it doesn't mean that their relationships have been rebuilt.

KIM: Then what is the function of love in your film?

LEE: I don't think that love between men and women is important. Whether it succeeds or fails, ends happily or tragically is not an issue. Love itself has meaning. Does love make a happy ending? That's nonsense. I do believe in the power of love, though. If God made humans capable of feeling love, then it must be more than biological. Love itself has meaning when it changes lives. Humans are reborn through it. Love shows its true meaning when people fall in and out of love. It's a necessary fantasy for human beings. And cinema should be just as valuable a fantasy. But love often collides with external forces. Maybe love is more meaningful when it collides with external forces. Like family. The issue of love in *Green Fish* differs from *Oasis*. In *Green Fish* love is not a fantasy. Mak-dong is attracted to Mi-ae not because he loves her but because of the image he projects onto her. This is related to my own experience.

When I was his age, taking my first steps in the world, real life wasn't reality. It only existed in images for me. These images can be attractive and intoxicating. For

Mak-dong, Mi-ae isn't an object of love; rather, he sees her as an intoxicating image. In the film, her actions exist as images that he can't understand, like the rosy scarf she wore the first time he saw her... this is different from love.

KIM: In your film, the characters experience an identity crisis. It seems to me your films are about questions of identity.

LEE: The reverse chronology in *Peppermint Candy* is a form of searching for identity. But in *Green Fish*, the character has adopted a flawed way of searching. He finds himself not with his real family but with an inferior, dysfunctional family. In *Oasis*, because Gong-ju is disabled, communication itself is blocked. Jong-du is a troublemaker who seeks out other kinds of communication. He annoys people and makes them feel uncomfortable.



KIM: Young-ho, the protagonist of *Peppermint Candy*, experiences all the tragedies of Korea's modern history. Sun-im represents more than one woman. Why did you portray the characters this way?

LEE: The movie couldn't have been made otherwise. I wanted to show images of the Korean people. I wanted to show that the last 20 years of social and political upheaval haven't been simple—it's much more complicated than the external causes—and that other people have a similar experience in common. I wanted the audience to identify with him emotionally. He could be any of us. That was the key. Except for the wife, all the women in the film could be the same person. That's why the girl in Chapter 6 looks like Sun-im. I once considered letting Moon So-ri play all the female characters in the film.

KIM: Maybe because of your background as a writer, your screenplay is literarily accomplished with a solid structure. Some of the descriptions are amazing. For instance, in *Oasis*, you write, "Screen is filled with Gong-ju's pupils. They resemble a dark and round-shaped galaxy. A chilly blue sky is suffused over it. A layer of moistness forms and drops as tears." Did you actually intend to show this on screen?

LEE: Anything is possible with words. (laughs) I can write something even more outrageous than that. Filmmaking is different from writing a novel. But because casting and funding is based on the screenplay, I write it the best I can, as if I could shoot it accordingly. (laughs) That's my strategy. In fact, I did try to shoot the scene you mentioned, but it was too difficult. It was an extreme close-up and very hard to focus. The image was more grotesque than I imagined. The imagery was cinematic and unfamiliar but I didn't want the audience to conceive the image as something unique. So I took the scene out.

KIM: Isn't it because you're uncomfortable with conventional, formulaic films—both in the way they are made and watched?

LEE: The film is made out of force of habit. The plot and style are all conventional.

KIM: My apologies for bringing up another director, but Kitano Takeshi's films flow slowly. His films have their own style of appeasing the world with ease. But in your films, plot and style are tightly formed, which seems to say, "This is the world. Stare it right in the face."

LEE: Takeshi's films are fundamentally jokes in terms of the form, grammar and content. It's his way of making a joke on society. He started out as a comedian. Formally speaking, unexpected material pops out which make people laugh. Jokes are similar in this way. He even employs brutality in his jokes. He throws jokes at the world, while I take everything seriously. But who likes a stiff who only talks about serious stuff?! (laughs)

In the 90s, being serious kills the party because you make a fool out of yourself by talking about things people already know but choose not to talk about. In the 80s, there was some merit in telling the truth. But by the 90s, truth was not appreciated. Here I am, still taking things seriously and trying to tell the truth. How irritating! (laughs)

KIM: But you are doing it differently.

LEE: I do it my way.

KIM: The reverse causality in *Peppermint Candy* was innovative. If the movie were chronological, it would be too serious. *Oasis* is a love story, but a different kind of love story.

LEE: After making *Peppermint Candy*, many people asked me to novelize the film. One critic told me he felt confident that the film would be worth reading as a novel. But I felt it would be meaningless because the cinematic grammar of *Peppermint Candy* wouldn't work in a novel. Cinema is a medium that utilizes time. The

audience experiences time as it plays out on the screen. This cinematic quality and process can't be translated into a novel. *Oasis* has different issues. Gong-ju, the female protagonist, suffers from cerebral palsy. People are not comfortable looking at her because she looks ugly. But that's hard to convey in writing. In words, readers feel sympathy for her. But if they are confronted with an image of her, they experience discomfort. It is only then that the audience can accept the character, find her inner beauty or embrace her as a human being. But with a novel, this process doesn't happen. It can only reveal what words can reveal.

KIM: Your films display a strong self-awareness of the film medium itself. For instance, in *Peppermint Candy* there are shots of the train moving backwards, and in *Oasis*, there are times when Gong-ju acts as if she weren't disabled. These are the moments when the audience realizes they are watching a film.

LEE: It might be hard to compare, but I'm very conscious of the film medium itself. I came to film after writing novels. I'm not used to looking at the world through film. Because I was working with another medium and then came to use film as a tool, I constantly ask myself what film is. The shots of the train moving backwards can be thought of as the expression of my cinematic query. The reversal of time is conceptually possible. I'm not quite sure if it's conceptual or cinematic to show reverse motion, but I thought it was more cinematic because, in other mediums, the concept of time is not essential. Time matters in film. It is the essence of cinema because unlike other art forms, time can be manipulated through the editing process. Music also deals with time, but it doesn't edit it. Film edits time. While a movie is playing, the time frame functioning in the film collides against time functioning in reality. Cinematic time often distorts real time. The audience watches a film while experiencing it. Cinema is a medium that allows us experience different forms of time, even reversal of time. In the case of literature, one can conceptually think about these different forms of time, but can't to experience them. That's why I thought it was more cinematic.

KIM: But doesn't this particular cinematic mechanism replace Young-ho's memory? It's the audience who witnesses this reversal of time, not Young-ho. The characters can't go back into the past, but the film medium makes it possible. Don't you think this is a contradiction?

LEE: The audience project themselves onto the characters while watching a film. Through this act of projection, we can either absorb a character, or take objective distance and reflect on ourselves. Film viewing is innately contradictory because it functions in both ways. Cinema itself is full of contradictions. I didn't want to lose the power of these contradictions. I wanted neither full identification nor objectification. This was my intention in the case of *Peppermint Candy*. I wanted the audience to feel emotional or conceptual confusion and accept the things they know aren't real. The audience knows that the characters aren't really going back into the past, but emotionally, the audience can follow this reversal of time. They know they can create their own emotional sentiment. This is what I wanted the audience to feel.

KIM: *Peppermint Candy* utilizes non-conventional flashback. That's why the emotional issues turn toward the audience and not to the characters. The memory of the characters is presented objectively.

LEE: The main character denies his past. *Peppermint Candy* contains many confrontational elements. Small objects like a photo, peppermint candy, a dog... When Young-ho first meets his wife, he teaches her to ride a bicycle. Then his wife learns how to drive while having an affair. Many opposing elements remind him of the past, which forces him to taste the bitter ironies of his life. He tries not to feel them, and even when he does, he tries not to show it. In a conventional flashback, the audience emotionally reacts when the protagonist feels something even if they don't know what's happening. In my film, the protagonist seems insensitive and conceals his feelings. Because of this, the audience can feel things through his past.

KIM: Do you think this is the function of film as a medium?

LEE: I don't know. But because the protagonist seems insensitive, the audience can feel more pain and anger. The core logic and grammar of eliciting feeling from the audience, functions through the manipulation of time. The sense of reversed time and the experience of it make this possible. I didn't exactly reverse the movement by making the film move backwards, but the audience can experience the reversed time. This is not possible in any other medium. In the case of a novel, the flashback contains the concept of stream of consciousness, but it can't actually bring us back in time. It's more about description, and recollection of the past. A flashback in a novel can't make us experience the past like the powerful medium of film.

KIM: In this sense, your films seem different from realistic films.

LEE: Some audiences complain that my films are so tightly knit together and intentional that there is no place for them to escape. I admit this is true, but I don't think it's something I should avoid. If a film is to capture an audience, then no way of escape is a virtue. It has to continue on without losing its hold on the audience. I

Peppermint Candy, 1999



want my audience to be able to reflect without being absorbed in the film, so my films may seem too tightly woven. In any case, I think this criticism is proof that they've reflected on my films. Whether or not they accept them is their choice. I wanted to avoid making something that lets the audience freely dwell, breath, feel and leave without a trace.

KIM: Maybe your films are too tight. In *Peppermint Candy*, I felt an intense emotional texture, which oscillated between heaven and hell in every shot. *Oasis* has a precisely planned symbolic and emotional logic. The symbolism of the socially alienated couple dancing by the Cheonggye overpass is very dense but normal.

LEE: I don't like to explain the meaning of my films. Being a director is exhausting because I have to promote the film as if I were a World Cup Publicity Ambassador. I can't say no. The problem is I keep explaining things. I used to be a teacher so I'm good at explaining—that's my specialty. But the more I explain, the less accurate I feel. If I could explain it in words, why make a film? I would rather write a column at home if I could. But since I can't, I make films. It's a drag to have to explain them.

KIM: We encounter a film at the threshold of understanding and misunderstanding.

LEE: If you write a novel, these things don't usually happen. Novelists get interviewed about their novels but they don't have to explain them. Filmmakers have to explain their films. A novelist can even say, "My novel sucks." But filmmakers can't. They have to make the film look good, wrap them up nicely. They can't ever say, "My film is boring. I didn't shoot it very well." Whatever they do, they have to make it marketable. It's painful, but that's the film medium. Even the director's comments become a product. We joke about this sometimes, but a director knows that his comments can become a commodity and that he's selling himself. As a commodity, a film is never free from market evaluation. Never. Filmmaking is totally different from writing a novel.

KIM: Aren't we all out at the market?

LEE: A flea market is different from Wal-Mart or Carrefour. Movies are more like Wal-Mart, which makes it tough. You can be more casual in a flea market and hang out with friends. You don't have to constantly rip people off there. Anyhow, I'm kind of trying to adjust myself to Wal-Mart.

KIM: LEE Chang-dong as a director has brand value.

LEE: But that brand value doesn't attract a large audience. Many people have heard about *Peppermint Candy* but have never seen it. One person I know said, "I heard the film was well-made," but he never saw it. People recognize my name and face since I've been on the film scene, but it's only in vain. Not many people have actually seen my films. I'm just famous on paper. Sometimes, I want to hear that my films are popular. The most pleasing response I got for *Oasis* was when a film director said, "This is really melodramatic." I wasn't trying to make a mainstream film, but I wanted to communicate with a mainstream audience. So it makes me feel good when I hear things like that.

KIM: When we first see Gong-ju in *Oasis*, we feel uneasy because of her physical ugliness. And we wonder if anyone can ever love her. But then Jong-du is suddenly attracted to her, and later we begin to see into her mind. We feel sympathy for her neglected state and see her as a woman.

LEE: Gong-ju is indeed a woman. I needed a scene that shows she is a woman. That's why I put in the nude scene. It was emotionally difficult to shoot, but I had no choice. A nude body that's too skinny tends to look sick and I didn't want that. I wanted to show the viewer that she's a real, mature woman who someone can fall in love with.

KIM: In *Oasis*, the main characters' circumstances get even worse when their love grows. That feels heavy.

LEE: It's important for the audience to imagine something other than what is being presented. They already have the fantasy they want. They can anticipate this. If they already have this, then that's enough. I don't have to show that, do I? (laughs) Everyone wants a fantasy. Whether it's conventional or not, there is a conflict between the audience expectation and my presentation. And this conflict makes things uncomfortable and heavy. I wanted the audience to feel this tension.

KIM: Fantasy is one of the keywords in your film. You seem to give the viewer the fantasy they want, but, in fact, you are interested in delivering something else.

LEE: In *Oasis*, there is a scene that makes fun of fantasy and the film medium. It's the scene where Jong-du is watching a film shoot and asks, "Who's starring in this film?" Originally, I was going to have him say, "Is SUL Kyoung-gu starring in this film?"

KIM: There is a fantasy scene where Jong-du and Gong-ju are secretly eating take-out noodles at his elder brother's garage. When Jong-du answers the phone, Gong-ju stands up and talks. That scene looks realistic. Gong-ju pretends to cry and says, "How can you do this to me?" This scene is different from other fantasy scenes.

LEE: I tried my best to shoot fantasy scenes that didn't look like fantasy. Not just the scene you mentioned, but other scenes like when Jong-du and Gong-ju miss the train at the subway station and sing, "If I Were," and also when Gong-ju hits Jong-du with a water bottle in the train. In fact, a movie is a fantasy just like the painting of the oasis hanging on the wall. I didn't want that look. I wanted to have a fantasy that paralleled the real world, and a fantasy which was worse than the ordinary real world. But the garage scene is emotionally more complicated than other fantasies. Every emotion is there—it's not like everything is happy and rosy. Cerebral palsy leaves Gong-ju physically disabled, but emotionally she is like an ordinary person. Even though Gong-ju loves Jong-du, she knows he has shortcomings. Jong-du boasts that he can buy her an expensive meal, but brings her to the body shop, which is



⋮ *Oasis*, 2002

closed Sundays, and treats her to take-out food. She is disappointed and conveys this natural feeling.

I had a difficult time shooting the scene of the elephant and Indian woman. It was hard to make it a realistic kind of fantasy or a fantasy that looked worse than reality, while using props that are often used in fantasy.

KIM: At the climax of *Oasis* how did you avoid the temptation of making it more dramatic? People wanted to cry at that point, but you didn't allow them to cry.

LEE: Even if I wanted to shoot a dramatic climax, my crew would have refused. Neither SUL Kyoung-gu nor the cinematographer would have done it. They would've asked, "Why are you doing this all of a sudden?" That's natural. One of my ADs said, "We restrain things right before the audience is emotionally moved." (laughs) We made that clear from the very beginning, so it was natural to have that

kind of ending.

KIM: Even though the reality was harsh and nobody understood their love, the camera could have more closely captured the energy between them. The emotionless shots at the climax are cruel when the audience is trying to empathize. I felt the shots were designed to hinder us from being empathetic.

LEE: It would have been easy to make a touching scene if I wanted to. And there were lots of requests to do so. But I thought what I could do was to present their dream and their cry for help. Nothing more.

KIM: It was the same with *Peppermint Candy* but unlike other Korean films, *Oasis* is an amazingly detailed film. When Jong-du takes Gong-ju to the birthday party, he tells her about a bird story that his father told him when he was a child and he giggles. This scene is rich with emotional texture. I wonder why he behaves this way. And like the audience, the characters at the birthday party are puzzled by his actions. How do you direct an actor who plays an ambiguous character?

LEE: I didn't say much to SUL Kyoung-gu when we were shooting that scene. All I said was, "That's too much. Do a little less." SUL told me that while he didn't understand Jong-du's behavior, he did understand the character. If you have to explain everything to everyone, then you're screwed. Jong-du and Gong-ju would have understood the emotions of that scene even if I didn't explain it. One you explain it, the film tends to go in a certain direction. So, the communion of heart with heart is good.

KIM: What do you do if the communion of heart with heart isn't working?

LEE: Most of the time it's something I have to deal with. Whether it's a problem with the staff or actors, this communion has no limit. If that's not working, I'm the one to blame. I torture myself and suffer, then people get concerned. I don't like the

word ‘actor,’ but there is no other word. That precise terminology creates the stereotype that an actor can only act. Being real, and looking like you are real, are two different things. I had that conflict a couple of times while making *Oasis*. For example, after Jong-du was arrested for making love to Gong-ju, and his brother came to the police station, I told SUL, “You should be ashamed.” And SUL got upset. Really, I could see that. He didn’t tell me directly, but he felt there was nothing he should be ashamed of. That’s why he was upset. Jong-du wasn’t able to stand up for himself and even worse, I told him to be ashamed. That was the last straw. He would’ve rather been shameless. But in fact, Jong-du is ashamed. And that’s why he told his younger brother Jong-sae, “Why do I only see you at the police station?” He certainly is ashamed... but why? It’s a very sensitive matter, which only director and actor can understand. But we didn’t have a huge fight about it. There were times when both SUL and MOON got really stressed out and became angry.

KIM: Do you think *Oasis* has a happy ending?

LEE: Of course. Doesn’t love win? (laughs)

KIM: Among the three films you’ve made, *Oasis* is the most optimistic.

LEE: I’m always optimistic. And I really mean it.

KIM: That optimism looks out into the future. It has the sort of attitude that someday the world will change, but for now, I will calmly observe our failure.

LEE: I suppose it’s natural and fortunate to have my attitude toward human beings and the way they live. I don’t think it’s anything special, but the film scene tends to verify this by saying, “Isn’t your world view too gloomy?” and, “Isn’t your optimism problematic?” and, “Don’t your films make audiences uncomfortable? If you think of the extent to which our reality makes us uncomfortable, the experience that my film provides is nothing. Maybe it’s because of my background, but the fact that they

can't stand the uneasiness of the film is the problem. Optimism and hope are words which can't be used easily. People often ask if we have hope, but I can't use that word so easily. It's something one feels and shares without having to say anything. When I say things like, "I'm optimistic about our future as human beings," at that moment, things feel wrong. Optimism seems to be a required element in films and maybe it's because film is a popular medium. I am seldom affected by it though. It just puzzles me. To make an optimistic and hopeful film with a happy ending—how does one do that? If I present what the audience wants, does it mean the film is optimistic? No. Am I mistaken? (laughs)

KIM: How do you think of the character's fate in the film?

LEE: The character's fate is not completed by itself. When the character is emotionally moved, the audience can follow that emotion. Even though a film presents the final destiny of a character, a perfect world doesn't end with the final destiny. A character can be happy in the film, but that doesn't mean our world will be happy.

KIM: Then what does a film provide to an audience?

LEE: The questions of 'Why do we need film, why do we want a story, and how do they transform into symbols?' have meaning when the audience can accept these questions. Young-ho's fate in *Peppermint Candy* doesn't represent my view of the world. What I tried to say is that his fate itself doesn't have any meaning nor is it perfect. It earns meaning and symbolism when it meets with the audience's emotions and creates something new. It's the same with *Oasis*. I wasn't just moving the characters around and making them miserable. I wanted the audience to embrace the fate of the characters. I think the way in which the audience reacts to the film is different from a reader reacting to a book. If you look at the literary world, there is no literary work which is perfect by itself. It is always given to a reader unfinished. The reader is the one who finishes it. While reading the text, he or she imagines,

adds meaning, fills in the gaps, and thus completes it. As the completion continues, the work gains more meaning and symbolism. Upon reading a book, the reader thinks of it as a whole. It's not because the text is perfect but because the reader is adding something while reading. Because of this process, a literary work is always perfect to a reader. But in the case of film, although the work is already complete when the audience views it, the audience feels the movie is incomplete. As he or she projects their worldview, they feel something lacking. They tend to accept the film text as it's presented and accept the characters' fates along with the ending. I wanted to break this convention.

KIM: A movie provides us with a contradiction because it allows us to see the fantasy.

LEE: The audience can see and hear it. They can't taste or smell it, but they use their visual and auditory senses. They almost experience what the characters

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• *Oasis, 2002*
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experience. After watching a film, the audience believes in their own subjective view. The critics, the general audience and adolescents new to cinema, don't think there is more than meets the eye. If a person likes the movie and their friend doesn't, this person will regard their friend as a weirdo. It's like they think they are the only person who knows the truth. This is the characteristic of film medium, a trait of audio-visual work. But what is crucial is that the meaning is missing. Historically, meaning is a result of text. Not just simple text, but mass-produced text, printed type. This is a result of modernization as well. If literature and theatre, which are modern mediums, utilize meaning as a tool, then things have changed. We're now in the age of post-meaning. Whether we like it or not, movies have become the dominant medium. Other mediums which deal with meaning have weakened, degenerated and lost their power over people. Maybe because I'm coming from the literary world, or I grew up that way, I tend to implant meaning into film. I suppose I'm trying to create as much meaning as possible and communicate with the audience through my films.

KIM: What is the result of cinematic communication?

LEE: That's something we can't anticipate or measure. What I can do is try to communicate with the audience. I'm not saying that communication is complete after they see the film. What I'm saying is, let's think of a way we can communicate. In fact, I don't think it's possible to communicate through the film medium. It's possible in literature. Literature exists in text. The recipient experiences the text as a form of communication. This isn't possible in film because it doesn't exist in text. A literary work is delivered through print where meaning and concepts are crucial. There is no bodily smell or any other sense being transmitted. Even a play, which utilizes the human body, exists in text and can thus communicate. But a film is not a physical or conceptual thing. It is only an illusion. Can *Titanic* or *The Godfather* communicate? When people read literature or a play, they believe that meaning can exist beyond the text. That's why a space opens up for communication to grow. A moviegoer doesn't believe there is anything more beyond the film itself. When he or

she thinks something is right, that's it. There is no middle ground for our senses—it's all or nothing.

KIM: What do you think of Korean films?

LEE: I used to think of the practical aspects whenever I watched Korean films. I wondered why the films felt different from reality and why they didn't talk about reality. I don't think Korean films have a tradition in realism. Maybe that was true in the 60s, but films in the 70s are distorted if we look at them in terms of Korean film history. As a whole, I doubt if the identity of Korean film is realism. It seems to me, the term 'realism' is being abused. What is Korean is a question not just for film, but for the culture in general. But we haven't been able to answer this, if we indeed need to. I think the Korean film and cultural scene are feeble. It's getting worse these days. The artistic vitality of the late 90s, which produced films by HONG Sang-soo and KIM Ki-duk, has disappeared. The lack of talent and problems with the system are to blame. It's harder to witness the emergence of creative young directors like HONG and KIM. What do you think of recent Korean films? Are there any good films?

KIM: Of course there are. But it seems to me, I'm seeing more films that make me realize how difficult filmmaking is. The films' intentions are clear, but many times something is missing and they fail to overwhelm us. It's rare to experience the same kind of sensation I felt when I first saw HONG's film.

LEE: I agree. It's a problem with the system as well. I haven't seen many films, but when I saw some that others said were good, I felt something wasn't real even though they were good. I felt something was fake. It's better not to lie, but it's hard to stimulate the audience otherwise. It's a dilemma for a commercial film.

KIM: What do you think is the biggest problem in the Korean film scene?

LEE: The aspect of the film industry is crucial. Even if a director changes his or her

film aesthetics, this doesn't automatically influence the audience. Films can't be separated from the industry. There are market trends and conditions for the production. In order to survive in the Korean film industry, a film must communicate with the audience. It's fundamental. Another big issue is distribution. Too many films fail to be distributed. Even if a film receives a favorable response from viewers, without distribution the audience will never see it in the theatre. Nowadays, the marketing costs for a film is astronomical. The system is the problem. Korean blockbusters are killing other Korean films.

KIM: Around the time that you resigned as the Minister of Culture and Tourism, you advocated the sliding scale screen quota system, which cut down the mandatory screening of Korean films from 146 days to 73 days. If the Korean film market share shrunk, the original mandatory numbers would be reinstated. Instead of defending the screen quota, you made the proposal of adopting a mandatory minor film quota for art films and low-budget independent films. Your proposal brought huge opposition from the film circle. Personally, I supported your proposal, but I, too, received severe criticism.

LEE: There was a misunderstanding because the amount of information I was getting at that time as minister was very different from other people in the film scene. I knew the inside story of the free trade agreement between Korea and the US, and as minister, I couldn't completely ignore the Korean government attempting to compromise with the USA. That's why I made the proposal. Even though the response was bad, my beliefs haven't changed. A minor film quota is one of the alternatives. Finding a way to resist and survive Hollywood's big money, distribution and marketing, is not just my problem—it's a worldwide problem. Film festivals function as an alternative market, but in terms of the size, they're like a small flea market. The core of the film medium is not mass production but mass reproduction. The industrial competitiveness of film is not a relative one. It is all or nothing. For example, there are two films with an industrial competitiveness of 51:49. If the theatres are to screen the film, the numbers will be 100:0 because the theatre will choose the film that is more commercially viable.

Therefore, diversity is difficult to achieve. We need to seriously find a way to embrace diverse films in the Korean film market.

KIM: In Korea, the number of screenings of art films has declined. Do you think Korean film culture is distorted?

LEE: I think there have been more diverse films. The demands for non-mainstream films have increased. But the chances to see them are fewer because of distribution. The video market has disappeared. In the past, it was possible to screen films in a small theatre and then release them on video, but now, as the video market is dying, films that target a niche market are not being produced. That's why film revenue and audiences are declining. Even though film festival audiences have grown, art films are not being distributed. There used to be a small demand for Korean films in Europe, but it seems to me that's not the case anymore. Audiences have stopped watching non-commercial art films. I think film viewing is a learning process. The act of going to the cinema is a learning experience. Creating an optimistic outlook through an increased audience is crucial. On the surface, Korean film has grown tremendously, but on the whole as an industry, it has been declining. Production costs need to be rationalized. Blaming all these problems on the audience is irrational. The audience is not responsible for the problems. I have hope for Korean society. But right now we need to consider more fundamental problems.

KIM: You returned to film production after a long hiatus as Minister of Culture and Tourism. How did you fit in?

LEE: I don't know how other people saw me, but it was difficult. I felt I lost some cinematic sense. I must have changed while I was minister. I think I developed an obsession with being a good person. I feel very uncomfortable in the production scene. It's agonizing. I have troubling thoughts like, Do I have the right to drive these people crazy by scolding them? I feel guilty about exploiting the staff's labor with my lack of ability. There was a time when we were in *Secret Sunshine* shooting

and most of the staff returned to Seoul for the national holiday. I went to a diner by myself and met with an assistant lighting person. While we were eating, he just stared at me and said, “Director, be confident in yourself.” I must be seen as lacking self-confidence. (laughs) Once I confessed to my fellow director that the production scene was painful. He said he used to feel like me, but now just being in the production scene makes him happy. I totally understand what he’s saying. Maybe I’ll do the same someday, but not now.

KIM: It seems to me directors often fall into that trouble. A sense of shame in having to push the staff no matter how hard the situation is.

LEE: It may be too simple to say that, but the production scene has more delicate problems. It’s hard to put it in words. Sometimes there are situations when we need to hurt each other, not collaborate, for the sake of a good outcome. This really troubles me. I’m seriously considering not making films any more.

KIM: Really?

LEE: I’m pessimistic about the future of film. How can we stimulate the audience, and with what? Maybe because I come from a writing background, I was more optimistic about cinematic communication. But now, things are a bit different. Not only the Korean audience, but the global audience aren’t really moved by films that are moderately good. What are the options? It might just be me, but if I look at recent films by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, they seem to get lost. Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children* was amazing. But his recent films seem to betray his older films. His recent films seem to deny an era. I think things are the same everywhere. Even worse, they have to endure the extreme fatigue of scolding the staff in order to achieve the 1% possibility, which makes things psychologically difficult.

KIM: I heard that *Secret Sunshine* is based on a short story *Story of Worm* by LEE Chung-joon. You seem to avoid mentioning it.



• • • *Secret Sunshine, 2007*

LEE: I only took the motif from the novel.

KIM: *Story of Worm* is about a woman who lost her child to a kidnapper. She turns to Christianity and thinks she's received salvation. She decides to forgive the kidnapper, but he tells her that he, too, became a devout Christian and has asked forgiveness from God. She feels deeply betrayed. It's a very shocking story.

LEE: The motif—a woman losing her child to a kidnapper—is the same. But the way the film unfolds is different. The film doesn't focus on the incident. It focuses on what happens after the incident. The reason why I didn't want to speak about the original story before the release of the film is because I didn't want the audience to have any preconceived ideas. There have been numerous films about kidnapping in Korea, and I didn't want the audience to encounter the film with a certain

framework. The subject of the film is not important. In the early part of the film, there is a shocking incident. But the female protagonist overcomes it early on. The film focuses on the hereafter. Then a car mechanic hangs around her. He's not exactly trying to have a relationship with her, but just has a fondness for her. I filmed the mundane everyday life. It was plainly shot. I tried to shoot simple shots. Whenever the assistant directors told me to edit the film more, I jokingly told them, "It's much better than you think, kids." I plan to use some Argentinean music, but there won't be many scenes with music because it's awkward to have music with plain shots. I'm going for the simplest effect.

KIM: You said that it's getting difficult to affect the audience and you mentioned you've tried to shoot the film as plainly as possible. I feel a great ambition here.

LEE: That's not the case. (laughs) You will understand once you see the film. If I get to shoot more films, they will be even simpler.

KIM: The flavor of your films comes from your attitude. Anyway, they are delicious.

LEE: Like boiled barley rice? (laughs)

KIM: Can't even compare with standard fast food. They are very healthy.

LEE: But we don't eat barley rice at home everyday, either. (laughs)

KIM: We deliberately search for it so we can eat it.

LEE: (laughs)

KIM: Strangely enough, I feel energized from listening to your pessimism. It's not cynicism. Your pessimism seems to be coming from looking reality in the eye and enduring it.

LEE: Maybe. I don't believe in easily definable notions like happiness or tender emotion. I used to believe there was a way to communicate with the audience in spite of stereotypes and preconceived ideas. But I'm not sure anymore. If I'm able to make more films, I'll keep asking myself these questions.



Biography

Before he became a film director, LEE Chang-dong was a novelist. Prior to becoming a novelist, he was involved in theatre and he was a high school teacher. LEE seems indifferent to all these career changes, and finds the halo effect of his success quite troublesome. When asked if he is happy about the tremendous success he has achieved so far, he doesn't seem to care. "How can a person who doesn't know the concept of happiness be happy? My DNA is innately gloomy" he said. But LEE is not the kind of person who just simply divides life into light and dark.

LEE was born in 1954 in Daegu, Gyeongsang Province, and had a difficult childhood as the son of a leftist idealist. His father never had a job so his mother had to work hard to support the family. LEE grew to hate his father and sympathize with his mother. His other relatives were also involved in the leftist movement, which was hard on his family and left him fearful of leftist ideology. At the same time, he took great pride in being part of the noble class of the old Korea, even though his family fell into disrepute. "When I was a child, I was part of a baseless elitism, but as I grew older, that turned into an aesthetic and moral pride. I guess this is what both trapped me and anchored me in my life," he said.

To express his pride, LEE wielded his pen. He had thought of himself as a writer since he was a child. When he was young, he wrote *Three Kingdoms*, and even drew the Kingdom of Wei, Kingdom of Shu and the Kingdom of Wu, while he wrote the story he wanted. He didn't show it to anyone, however; it was just a way of communicating with himself. Since he was lonely and didn't know how to

communicate with the world, he expressed his secret desires through writing. He questioned himself and tentatively concluded that his moral sentimentality came from his family background. On the one hand, he was afraid of his history—a ruined noble family with communist ties; on the other hand, he was tremendously conscious of social irregularities.

Theatre was another art form LEE was interested in early on. His elder brother, who was involved in the Daegu theatre scene, had been taking him to the theatre since he was ten. When he was in his 20s, when LEE's writer friends thought he was writing, he was mostly playing around on the theatre scene. People don't know it, but he even acted back then. He sometimes thought he was more connected to theatre than he was to the literary scene. He had been involved in theatre before he graduated with a degree in Korean language education from Kyungpook University. He then went on to teach at a high school in a remote mountain village in 1980. He became known in the literary world when his novel *Jeon-ri*, won a literary prize sponsored by Dong-a Newspaper. Shortly after that, he came to Seoul to teach Korean at Sin-il High School. As he got involved in the Daehangno theatre scene, he wrote novels in his spare time. He gathered his short stories and published them in *So-ji* and *There is a Lot of Shit in Nok Cheon*. Although LEE's novels created a sensation in the literary world, he didn't enjoy the writing process. In his novels, the father, as symbol of contempt and authority, and the offspring, who constantly try to escape, appear as recurring themes. LEE's work suggests that he hasn't completely freed himself from the ties that bind him to his experience.

With diverse characters from the 80s, *There is a Lot of Shit in Nok Cheon* portrays a petit bourgeois who experiences an identity crisis after meeting his social activist half brother. In describing the petit bourgeois's pain, LEE wrote, "He began to cry a constant stream of tears, and those tears, in turn, made him sadder. He didn't cry out of remorse or guilt; he cried because he didn't think anyone would understand his abject misery. His inexplicable sadness made him cry. For a long time, he cried like a child while sitting on a squat toilet for hours. As if relieving all the sadness from his heart, his face distorted as he cried. He threw himself entirely into the unmanageable emptiness and sadness, which had long been entangled in his

body.”

While LEE obsessively uses the verb “cry,” his sentences directly convey a feeling of urgency rather than a refined literary style. The directness of the sentences allows the reader to empathize with the main character’s despair. “He cried like a child while sitting on a squat toilet for hours,” is overwhelmingly powerful in its directness. In the postscript of *There is a Lot of Shit in Nok Cheon*, LEE writes, “At this moment, I would like to be reborn again. I want to write something different, and I feel the desire to live a different life. Like throwing off old clothes, I want to change into a different me. Although this desire has brought me failure so far, it is also a force that supports me.”

How has he been able to endure the suffering and constant change? LEE said that both his novels and films are “something that enables real communication between us, between people who are shunned by all.” His philosophy on communication is that “it’s uncomfortable and painful to stand at the point of collision, but you have no other choice if you want real communication.” Unfortunately, writing novels became too painful for him in the 90s. Until his early 20s, LEE had a narcissistic passion for writing, but he began to question the usefulness of what he had accomplished. His skepticism grew into questions like, “What can I do with this writing?” He couldn’t get away from certain moral pressures. In the 80s, while he was still looking at the world from a humanitarian point of view, the intelligentsia were longing for change after the protracted dictatorship. Humanitarians weren’t welcomed anymore. Intellectuals were required to see the world through a dialectical materialism, and Marxism became the leading ideology. LEE had enjoyed a fascination with writing when he was younger, but once he became a real writer within the intense social atmosphere, his pleasure dropped off until writing was just a job for him. Once he began to self-censor, it was too difficult to write and it drove him crazy to think he couldn’t write anymore. But the world changed after the 90s when socialist ideology crumbled and postmodernism took hold. The spend-crazy youth were no longer interested in politics and LEE felt terribly let down. Korean society still had the same problems had been grappling with for years, but the social atmosphere had completely changed. He got sick of

himself and didn't want to write anymore. But just as he was trying to find an excuse not to write anymore, he stumbled onto the film scene.

In the late 80s, postmodernism stood at the core of change in Korean society, and cinema was part of this change. During the 88 Olympics in Seoul, video players were widely distributed throughout Korea, enabling families to watch movies at home. Film moved to the center of popular culture, whereas text had been at the center of modern times. Textual meaning and concepts had controlled modern times, but audiovisual mediums were creating another world in the postmodern era. LEE was curious whenever his fellow writers talked about films, but he never dreamed of being a filmmaker. He jokingly talked about making a film, but he never thought it would turn into a reality. "Looking back," he said, "I think that might have been my destiny. Although I grew up in a small city, I went to the theatre because of my brother. Theatre was very familiar to me. I was also a painter when I was a teen, although I had to give that up because I didn't have enough money. I think I had the seeds to become a film director. Even though my life has floated along, it may have been my destiny."

LEE came to the film scene through director PARK Kwang-su. In the summer of 1992, PARK suggested that LEE join the production of *To the Starry Island*. They had met several years earlier through CHOE In-seok, who wrote the screenplay for *Chilsu and Mansu*. LEE first met PARK at the after party for this film. Until this point, LEE had thought filmmakers were living in a different world; but after meeting PARK, he changed his mind. PARK, with a painting background, was a serious, artistic type of director, unlike the entertainment types in the mainstream film scene. Under the sharp censorship of the dictatorship, PARK dared to explore the most controversial social and political problems. Although he wasn't successful at the box office after *Chilsu and Mansu*, he was becoming well known as a director who made critically acclaimed films. Based on a novel by IM Cheol-u, *To the Starry Island* was PARK's ambitious fourth film, which he also produced. In 1992, when PARK started preproduction, he wanted to meet the author. He asked LEE, who wrote the postscript to the novel, to introduce him to IM. IM eventually approved

the filming of his novel and even wrote the first draft of the script. After looking at the script, PARK asked LEE if he was willing to revise it.

LEE was in his late 30s when he got the offer from PARK. He was feeling skeptical of his writing career and wanted a temporary escape. In the social climate of the 90s, he felt claustrophobic—although the world hadn't really changed, the intelligentsia were different. During the 80s, LEE felt morally pressured into pursuing social ideals. But when socialism collapsed, he was uneasy and dissatisfied by the social climate, which was becoming more individualized and devoid of social values. He was experiencing an identity crisis, and, unable to find the inspiration to write, he lost his passion to write. Without a clear goal, he thought about going to Paris to study film. In his youthful sentimentality, he thought Paris might be able to provide him asylum. But PARK talked him out of it and told him he could study there after working more in the Korean film scene.

Although it was unclear if the film would be produced, LEE decided to join the staff of *To the Starry Island*. Because there was no office, LEE and PARK met in a café to discuss the script and to scout locations. LEE later confessed that working with PARK was like a crash course in filmmaking. PARK rejected LEE's first revision of the script because it wasn't cinematic enough. Although LEE thought that PARK's painterly sensibility wasn't compatible with his literary sensibility, he was entering the film world on the coat tails of PARK. When shooting began in 1993, LEE became an assistant director. He went to the film set just to experience what it was like. Yet, on the first day, the first AD was fired and LEE replaced him because he was the oldest among the other ADs. LEE wasn't around for pre-production because he was writing stories for his newspaper column. Because it was his first time as an AD, he was overwhelmed emotionally by the workload. Nonetheless, he felt comfortable. His literary friends who stopped by the set to cheer him up felt sorry for him. But as an AD, LEE enjoyed the freedom of torturing himself. His desire start over by beginning from the bottom, came true with the harsh working conditions of the film production. He was easily able to concentrate on his work as AD.

Until that time, LEE hadn't thought of becoming a director. He came onto the film scene as a skeptical writer and didn't see a future in filmmaking. But then

another life-changing moment came upon him. While traveling in Europe, he stopped by the Nantes Film Festival where many non-Koreans were talking about Korean films. This made him think about the universal nature of film and how it might be easier to cross national borders through film, compared to literature. Whereas literature takes a long time to translate, film can have almost simultaneous domestic and international releases.

The universal and contemporaneous qualities of the film medium intrigued LEE. He thought he might be able to transcend the communication barrier through film. When his heart was one step closer to filmmaking, disaster struck. In 1995, while writing the script for PARK's *A Single Spark*, his laptop computer crashed and lost all his data. He lost a biography about a CEO that he had just finished writing, and two other novels. The biography, *Tenaciousness*, was about PARK In-cheon, the founder of Kumho. After the difficult task of rewriting this book, LEE felt he had exhausted all of his energy for writing.

Help came to the despondent novelist when he was reborn as a filmmaker. The actor MYUNG Kae-nam, whom LEE had known from theatrical circles since 1982, led him on this path. After his theatrical success, MYUNG had a supporting role in *To the Starry Island*, in addition to other numerous roles. During the shoot, MYUNG and LEE often drank together on the island location and became friends. One day, after drinking, they were on the pier looking at stars when MYUNG jokingly told LEE that someday he would produce LEE's film.

In 1996, with his newly formed production company East Film, MYUNG prepared LEE for the debut of his first film. LEE never imagined that they would make a film together so quickly. In a moment of confusion, LEE had started to write the script for *Green Fish*. When he was about 80% done, he regretted the poor quality but the rest of it went quickly and smoothly. MOON Sung-keun and SHIM Hye-jin, who both starred in *To the Starry Island*, agreed to be in his film, and the great cinematographer, YU Yeong-gil promised to work with him as well. When LEE wasn't sure if he could direct, HAN Seok-gyu, one of the best actors in Korea, sent word that he wanted to be in the film after reading the script. Everything was proceeding smoothly at lightning speed as if it were a dream. With a stellar cast

supported by an excellent staff, LEE was getting all the encouragement in the world to become a film director. For this first film, LEE decided to ignore standard movie conventions. He thought his aesthetic standard and his story was more important. Because he didn't have a filmmaking background, he felt freer to experiment. He wasn't afraid of filmmaking even though it was unfamiliar to him. Had been involved in theatre longer than he was in the literary scene, working in a small theatre postering, performing and directing.

LEE was optimistic about his first film because of the confidence had gained during his theatrical work. Before *Green Fish*, had received a cold, humiliating reception. People weren't kind to a film director who had been a novelist. He was in his 40s, and the loneliness he felt was similar to when he was 12 and writing novels on recycled paper which nobody would read. LEE considers this loneliness a driving force in his creativity. He is far from being an arrogant artist with a vain reputation; rather, he is trying to build a new government in exile. After making *Peppermint Candy*, he was able to understand his 20s more clearly. He sighed and said, "The train in the film only took me back 20 years. There wasn't anyone else who despaired more than I did after that film. It wasn't the Gwangju Uprising that bothered me. What made me suffer was realizing how alienated I am now from when I was in my 20s." It was painful for him to remember how naïve he was in his 20s. LEE confessed that when someone came over during the shoot and complimented him on a particular scene, he instantly thought he might have to get rid of it. "It might be dangerous when others think a shot is nice. I'm not complaining about this kind of communication. I like to communicate. But the process of communication is important."

Because of this attitude, LEE rejected the use of any convenient emotional devices in the film. According to MOON So-ri, of *Peppermint Candy* and *Oasis*, LEE is the kind of director who grabs the actor by the neck and silently says, "Hey you. Look at this closely. This is you. This is you. Do you want to be a different person? No, this is you. Look at it directly and acknowledge it." The actor resists at first, but he or she has to do it anyway and eventually comes to accept it. LEE enjoys this

painful process. His process pushes the director and actors to tackle their own issues and reexamine them before they start. According to MOON, they had to shoot the rape scene in *Oasis* more than ten times because LEE kept saying it wasn't good enough. Even though she felt like fainting, LEE told her to go to the hospital to get a shot and come back for more takes. In the script, there is even a phrase, "Do the dreaming breath." The actors resist but LEE is ready to challenge them with the impossible. In his films, we can see the efforts he makes to communicate and his desire to make these efforts known.

LEE disapproves of the idea that Korean society has changed since the late 80s. He doesn't think words like ideal, humanism and innocence are outdated and nonsense, and doesn't understand the trend of mocking idealism. Regarding his filmmaking, he said, "I still think there is more. It's as obvious as the stars in the sky. The recent nihilism is reactive and not the answer. I can't change the world through my writing or films. They are like candles. When the wind blows, they will be extinguished, but a trace of them will remain."

"A literary work is delivered through print where meaning and concepts are crucial. Even a play, which utilizes the human body, exists in text and can thus communicate. But a film is not a physical or conceptual thing. It's only an illusion. When people read literature or a play, they believe that meaning can exist beyond the text. That's why a space opens up for communication to grow. A moviegoer doesn't believe there is anything more beyond the film itself. When he or she thinks something is right, that's it. There is no middle ground for our senses—it's all or nothing"

In 2002, LEE supported ROH Moo-hyun for president. People were surprised to see LEE, who had been struggling to communicate through his films, participate in a political discussion on TV to elect ROH. LEE hated intellectuals with scornful attitudes toward society and politics. He didn't know much about ROH, but had faith in him. ROH, with only a high school education, became a lawyer and then a popular politician who displayed principles and political agenda that broke with regionalism and educational values. LEE admired ROH's attitude because it's not

easy to keep faith in a political system governed by the law of survival of the fittest. ROH, like a protagonist in a tragic film, made a favorable impression, and LEE decided to help him.

LEE became the first minister of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism under the ROH administration. He is currently back on the film scene with his new film *Secret Sunshine*. He believes in rationality to-be-human-logic and flesh-god logic. He often uses the word lump, which could be interpreted as wanting to communicate through the flesh. LEE fills his films with flesh, but film is fantasy, and fantasy in films is always incomplete. His films don't deny the fate of being incomplete fantasies, and by conveying this, they hope to communicate fantasies of the future. LEE is an artist who is stuck between an incomplete reality and art that attempts to overcome this incompleteness. While accepting this irony in his heart, he lives his life and makes his films.





Synopsis

Green Fish (1996)



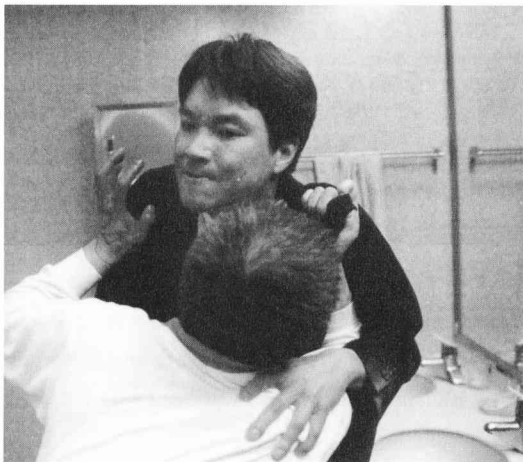
Mak-dong (HAN Seok-gyu), recently discharged from the military, rides a train home and encounters Mi-ae (SHIM Hye-jin) when her red scarf blows off and becomes tangled around his head. When Mak-dong returns her scarf, he finds her being harassed by thugs and saves her.

Mak-dong returns to his hometown in Ilsan. His family is now scattered around town busy making ends meet. He wants to live together as a family as they used to, but they no longer have the energy or will.

He tells his mother to stop working as a housekeeper and brags about making money. He lectures his sister, at the coffee shop where she is a waitress, not to work there even though she gives him money. Mak-dong's elder detective brother is alcoholic and ostracized. His other brother, who sells vegetables, works hard but can't seem to escape his poverty. It is only his disabled brother who gives Mak-dong a warm welcome. For his brothers, Mak-dong's insistence on the family living together sounds empty.

When Mak-dong isn't able to find a job, Mi-ae sends him a message. He goes to Yeoungdeungpo, Seoul, and finds her singing in a nightclub. She is a third rate singer and the lover of BAE Tae-gon, a gangster leader who rules the area. Mi-ae introduces Mak-dong to BAE, who initially gives Mak-dong a job as a parking attendant, and later recruits him into his gang. Starting at the bottom of the gang, Mak-dong works hard to gain the trust of his boss while having a secret crush on Mi-ae. Mi-ae seems to enjoy the attention. When she asks Mak-dong to ride the night train with her, they act as if they are happy lovers for a short while. But soon BAE pages Mi-ae to go back and they return home. She begins to despise Mak-dong, who, like her, is under the control of BAE.

BAE grew up as an orphan but is now a self-made man, a CEO of legal enterprise. He pretends to care for Mak-dong and teaches him the ropes. BAE's business suffers after



his former boss is released from prison and tries to take over BAE's area. When things get tough, BAE tells Mak-dong to kill the rival boss. Mak-dong dreams of completing the mission, and the large sum of money he will receive to start his new life. But tragedy awaits. After Mak-dong completes the job, BAE takes him to an abandoned factory and stabs him to death. Mak-dong stumbles to the car, where BAE

and Mi-ae sit, and dies with a pained face, steaming the windshield with his last breath. Time passes and Mi-ae, now pregnant, sits with BAE in a restaurant owned by Mak-dong's family near Ilsan. She notices that the people there look strangely familiar.

Peppermint Candy (1999)



Chapter 1. Picnic – Spring 1999

KIM Young-ho suddenly appears at a reunion of “Ga-ri-bong Bong-u-hui” and surprises his friends. After disrupting the gathering with his drunken antics, Young-ho climbs up onto the railroad tracks nearby. Facing an oncoming train, he exclaims, “I wanna go back!”

Chapter 2. Camera – 3 days ago, Spring 1999

KIM Young-ho, forty years old. No occupation. He has lost everything—his dreams, ambition, and love. When he is about to kill himself with a gun, a man suddenly

intervenes and takes him to his first love Sun-im, who is on her deathbed. Young-ho bursts into tears while holding a piece of peppermint candy. He ends up selling the camera Sun-im gave him for only \$40.

Chapter 3. Life is beautiful – Summer 1994



Young-ho is 35 years old and owns a furniture shop. The days he confronts his wife about an affair she's having with her driving instructor, he makes love to his assistant. Afterwards at a restaurant, he runs into a man whom he tortured when he was a detective.

Young-ho suddenly says, "Life is beautiful" to him. Several days later, when Young-ho has a housewarming party, he leaves as his wife launches into a lengthy prayer.

Chapter 4. Confession – April, 1987

Young-ho is an experienced detective with a wife in the last stages of pregnancy. He is tired of his loveless and passionless marriage, and bored with everyday life. While torturing a government dissident, Young-ho asks him about the phrase, "Life is Beautiful" which he found in his diary. After getting information about another wanted man, Young-ho goes to Gunsan to capture him. In Gunsan, he ends up sleeping with a café owner while thinking about his first love Sun-im.

Chapter 5. Prayer – Fall, 1984

Young-ho begins his career as a policeman. His innate propensity for violence slowly emerges through the influence of his senior co-workers. When he tortures a suspect

for the first time, the suspect faints and defecates on his hand. Shortly afterwards, Sun-im visits and tells him he has nice hands. He rejects her by touching another woman's hips in front of her. After he sees Sun-im off, his anger explodes when he goes to a diner where his co-workers are eating. Then he chooses Hong-ja, a waitress of the diner with an unrequited love for him.

Chapter 6. A visit – May, 1980

Young-ho begins his mandatory military service on the front lines. While Sun-im tries to visit him, his unit is deployed to suppress a student demonstration in Gwangju.

On another rainy day, Sun-im waits for him in front of an empty guardhouse. That night, he encounters a high school girl who looks like Sun-im on her way home. He accidentally shoots his M16 without knowing it and the tragedy begins.



Chapter 7. A picnic – Fall, 1979

Several students who attend evening class gather for a picnic. Among them are Young-ho and Sun-im, both in their early 20s. They are attracted to each other, happy in their innocence. In the dazzling sunlight, Young-ho tastes the peppermint candy that Sun-im gave him like it is the sweetest thing in the world.

Oasis (2002)



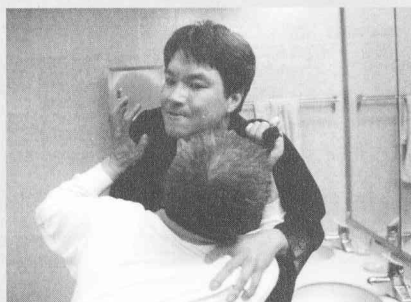
Jong-du returns home after serving a sentence for vehicular manslaughter, only to be treated with contempt by his family. One day, he visits the home of the man he killed and encounters a disabled woman abandoned by her family in an old, empty apartment. Although he doesn't understand his feelings for her, Jong-du visits her again. He feels a strange sexual desire for her, but she rejects him out of fear. One night while feeling ashamed, he receives a phone call from her.

Gong-ju, severely disabled with cerebral palsy, has a brother who pretends to live with her. He neglects her and steals her government pension. Gong-ju's neighbor receives money from her brother to take care of her, but she doesn't treat Gong-ju like a human being—she even makes out in front of her. After her family moves out, Gong-ju calls Jong-du. When he visits, she asks him why he gave her flowers. Jong-du is the only person who can see her as a woman. Living alone, Gong-ju is afraid of

the shadows cast over the painting of an oasis by the tree outside. Jong-du promises to get rid of the shadows with magic.

Jong-du and Gong-ju finally fall in love with each other but their love is fragile due to their social position. They share their feelings with phone calls, meeting at Jong-du's brother's body shop and eating together. Just between the two of them, she is a normal person who can talk, laugh and walk, and he is a dependable man who can embrace her with his heart. But Gong-ju's brother discovers them and calls the police. Jong-du is arrested and accused of being a rapist. That night, he sneaks out of the police station and goes to Gong-ju's apartment building. As the police run after him, he cuts off the tree branches, much to the neighbor's dismay. But Gong-ju understands what he is doing; he is casting spells for her.





Filmography

1. Green Fish (*Cho-log-mul-go-gi* 초록물고기)

1996 / 114 min / 35mm / 1.85:1 / Color

Production Company: East Film Company

Screenplay: LEE Chang-dong

Cinematography: RYOO Young-gil

Editing: KIM Hyun

Music: LEE Dong-joon

Lighting: KIM Dong-ho

Art Directing: JOO Byeong-do

Cast: HAN Seok-gyu (Mak-dong), SHIM Hye-jin (Mi-ae), MOON Sung-keun (BAE Tae-gon),
MYUNG Kae-nam (KIM Yang-gil), LEE Ho-seong (eldest brother),
HAN Seon-kyu (second brother), JUNG Jin-young (third brother), OH Ji-hye (Soon-ok)

Print: Exists

Sales Company: CJ Entertainment Inc.

Source of the Print: Korean Film Archive

2. Peppermint Candy (*Baghasatang* 박하사탕)

1999 / 129 min / 35mm / 1.85:1 / Color

Production Company: East Film Company

Screenplay: LEE Chang-dong

Cinematography: KIM Hyeong-gu

Editing: KIM Hyun

Music: LEE Jae-jin

Lighting: LEE Kang-san

Art Directing: PARK Il-hyun

Cast: SUL Kyoung-gu (KIM Young-ho), MOON So-ri (YOON Sun-im), KIM Yeo-jin (YANG Hong-ja),
PARK Se-bum (SHIN Kwang-nam), SUH Jung (Miss LEE), KO Suh-hee (Kyung-a),
LEE Dae-yon (Mr. KANG)

Print: Exists

Sales Company: CJ Entertainment Inc.

Source of the Print: Korean Film Archive

3. Oasis (*Oasis* 오아시스)

2002 / 132 min / 35mm / 1.85:1 / Color

Production Company: East Film Company

Screenplay: LEE Chang-dong

Cinematography: CHOI Young-taek

Editing: KIM Hyun

Music: LEE Jae-jin

Lighting: CHOI Young-taek

Art Directing: SHIN Jum-hee, OH Sang-man

Cast: SUL Kyoung-gu (HONG Jong-du), MOON So-ri (HAN Gong-ju),
AHN Nae-sang (HONG Jong-il), CHOO Kui-jung (Jong-il's wife),
RYOO Seun-wan (HONG Jong-se), KIM Jin-gu (Jong-du's mother)

Print: Exists

Sales Company: CJ Entertainment Inc.

Source of the Print: Korean Film Archive

4. Secret Sunshine (*Mil-yang* 밀양)

2007 / 141 min / 35mm / 2.35:1 / Color

Production Company: Pine House Film

Screenplay: LEE Chang-dong

Cinematography: CHO Yong-kyu

Editing: KIM Hyun

Music: Chrisian Basso

Lighting: CHOO In-sik

Art Directing: SHIN Jum-hee

Cast: JEON Do-youn (LEE Sin-ae), SONG Kang-ho (KIM Jong-chan),
CHO Young-jin (PARK Do-sup), KIM Young-jae (LEE Min-ki)

Print: Exists

Sales Company: CJ Entertainment Inc.

Source of the Print: Korean Film Archive

KIM Young-jin

Born in 1965, KIM Young-jin is one of the most active film critics in South Korea. During the early years of his career, he had written a number of articles for the movie weekly, *Cine 21* and from the year 2000 onwards, he has been working as a chief writer for *Film 2.0*, regularly contributing weekly reviews as well as in-depth feature articles. He has earned his Ph.D. at Chungang University on his dissertation *The Trends of Major Filmmakers of Contemporary Korean Films* and currently teaches as the assistant professor of the Department of Culture and Art at Myongji University. His major publications include *What Film Desires*.

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